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Bronze Jack;

The California Thoroughbred;

OR,

The Lost City of the Basaltic Buttes.

A Strange Story of a Desperate Adventure after
Fortune in the Weird, Wild Apache Land.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,
AUTHOR OF "THE FRESH OF FRISCO," "OVER-
LAND KIT," "ROCKY MOUNTAIN ROB,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BIG WALNUT CAMP.

RICH in gold and silver treasures is the wild, romantic Arizonian land, the marvelous country, as it is aptly named. Away back to the old Spanish time the waters of the Gila were commonly believed to flow over golden sands, and although time has in a measure dissipated some of the romance of the great golden stores, yet careful examination has amply proven that there was a great deal of truth in the early belief regarding the vast mineral deposits.

WITH A DEXTEROUS THROW HE SLUNG HIS HEAVY KNIFE UP AFTER IT, AND THE POINT WENT CLEAN THROUGH THE HAT CROWN.

Of Arizona, in the days of '51 we write, when, attracted by the great gold discoveries on the Pacific slope, desperate, determined men began to invade the fastnesses of the region washed by the Gila's stream and its tributaries, with pick and shovel, intent upon wresting the golden treasures from their hiding-place amid the wild ravines and the sandy valleys, erst sacred to the tread of the wild, red warrior.

And these adventuring prospectors really took their lives in their hands when they dared the dangers of the wild region over which for so many years the painted, feather-garnished red braves lorded without restraint, for it was a constant struggle between the two races, from the time that they first came in contact.

No mean antagonists the red Apache warriors, as the masters of the Mexican land long ago discovered to their cost. Even in the days of Cortez, the hardy Spanish conqueror, when, with his mail-clad handful of doughty adventurers, he fought his way from the coast, and at last succeeded in making himself the master of the land, the monkish men who came with the robber band (for Cortez's expedition was nothing better), and who acted as the historians of the bold, desp'rate enterprise, when, with remarkable candor, detailing the petty acts of cruelty, the terrible thirst for gold, as well as the valiant deeds of the adventurers, relate in their chronicles how the Spaniards overran all Mexico, but were checked on the north by wild and barbarian tribes, against whose power even the conquering Spaniards could not prevail.

And these wild tribes were the ancestors of the present race of horse-Indians, the Apaches, Comanches, and other kindred tribes, then, as now, bold fighting-men.

Many writers err in thinking that these tribes once inhabited Mexico, coming from the south, and were forced *northward* by better men.

Better men than these red warriors never yet breathed the air of earth.

In my mind there exists no doubt that these masters of the prairie came from the north, the descendants of the lost ten tribes of Israel, who wandered away into the wilderness.

Between the horse-Indians and the Arabs of the Eastern deserts, there is such a strong resemblance in manners and customs, that the careful observer can hardly doubt that the two have a common origin.

Soon the red chiefs had learned that these bearded white men, who used with equal skill the shovel and the rifle, were a quite different set of customers to deal with from the yellow-skinned Mexicans, whose territorial line had been arrogantly pushing back for years.

Some rich strikes had been made by the prospecting parties, and one in particular near the Mogollon mountain range had given rise to quite a town on the Clear Fork of the Rio Verde, or San Francisco river, as it is most commonly termed.

Big Walnut Camp, the town had been named, owing to the first cabin, a shanty saloon, of course, having been erected under the shade of a large walnut tree which stood on the east bank of the stream.

The diggings near were rich; so the town grew apace and being an outlying post, quite near to the territory claimed by the celebrated Apache chief, Manga Colorado, chief of the Colorado river Apaches, soon excited the especial enmity of the red warriors.

Representations having been made to the proper authorities that the town was in danger of being overwhelmed by an Indian attack, a detachment of soldiers were sent to build a small fort on the river's bank, and by holding it as a regular post, in a measure overawed the redskins.

The movement was a successful one, and up to the time of which we write, the savages, although terribly incensed at the proximity of the mining-camp, had not attempted to attack it.

As a town, Big Walnut Camp did not differ materially from the rest of the mining-burbs. There was the usual number of "hotels," the majority of which looked more carefully after their customers' liquid refreshment than anything else, a dance-house or two, four or five gambling-places, and two or three general stores.

For a new camp Big Walnut was quite a busy little place; the miners were doing well and money circulated briskly.

It was at the close of a sultry June day that we take up the thread of our story.

Twilight was coming on apace, and the miners were beginning to flock into the town.

So relentless had been the hostility exhibited by the Apaches that as yet few men cared to endanger their lives by dwelling outside the town, although since the advent of the troops a hollow sort of a peace had been patched up with the ruthless red braves, and for quite a time the red chiefs had refrained from active, open violence.

There was very little doubt, though, in the minds of the miners that if the "red devils," as they commonly termed the heathen bucks, caught any single white man at a disadvantage, they most certainly would take his scalp if they could.

And, with this belief then so fixed in the minds of the Big Walnut Campites, therefore

their wonder was much excited when a small party of adventurers, five in number, newcomers, pitched their camp a good half-mile to the north of the town, in a little bend of the river.

It seemed foolhardy in the extreme, and a couple of careful souls took it upon themselves to warn the strangers of their danger.

The caution was politely received, but the campers—just five in the party, splendid specimens of muscular manhood all of them, and superbly armed—replied that they presumed they had Indian-fighting before them, and that, therefore, the quicker they got their hand in the better!

The curiosity of the miners being excited, they inquired as to the object sought by the new-comers, and the strangers at once candidly replied that they were in search of gold and proposed pushing straight into the very heart of the Indian country.

Much wonder was excited in the town when the Big Walnut men returned and related the particulars of their interview with the strangers.

It was mere madness to attempt such a thing, and as one old fellow remarked, a veteran in the hills:

"Manga Colorado and his 'Paches wouldn't make more'n a mouthful out of sich a leetle crowd!"

Manga Colorado was the great chief of the Colorado river Apaches, and his domain took in all the country washed by both the big and little Colorado streams.

And following close on the heels of the miners the chief of the adventuring band came into the town and inquired concerning a guide to the upper regions.

But when the miners found out that the strangers designed going as far as the region of the Basaltic Buttes, they shook their heads; no man in the town knew aught of that wild land; but one old veteran, inspired by a lucky thought, advised the stranger to seek the abode of the Red Gold-Hunters, saying that one of them might guide him if any one could.

And when in curiosity the man asked particulars regarding the persons designated by so strange an appellation, he was briefly informed that the Red Gold-Hunters consisted of three men, half-breeds, who led a wild and solitary life, "no better than they ought to be, some folks think," the man added, "but I reckon that that is all talk, for no harm has ever been traced to their door yit. They're all born hunters and gold-finders, an' kin smell game, or a rich 'lead,' a mile off."

Receiving instructions how to find the dwelling-place of these strange denizens of the wilderness, the stranger departed.

Straight up the river he went, crossed it at the ford as he had been directed, being well mounted upon a powerful bay horse, and just above the crossing recognized the spot which had been described to him.

In fact, any one with eyes could not very well have missed it, for in a steep clay bank a door appeared, a wooden portal leading to a cave within. Over the door a horse-shoe was nailed *for luck*.

The stranger, dismounting, knocked loudly at the door, and a voice from within at once bade him enter.

Opening the door there appeared a passage about three feet wide, six feet high and five feet long, widening at the further end into a vaulted chamber, curiously tunneled out of the clay bank.

A candle was burning upon a rude table which was placed in the center of the apartment, and near the table, swinging lazily in a hammock, smoking a cigarette, was a tawny youth, evidently with much Indian blood in his veins, and extremely effeminate in his appearance.

The stranger looked at the occupant of the cave, considerably amazed, for this was not at all the kind of man that he expected to see.

"I am in search of the Red Gold-Hunters," he said.

"You've come to the right place," the youth replied, languidly. "I'm one of them."

"You are young."

"But I'm the chief of the band, nevertheless; John Mustang by name."

CHAPTER II.

THE RED GOLD-HUNTERS.

"JOHN MUSTANG, eh?" replied the stranger; "well, then, you're the very man I want, although you're not at all the sort of fellow I expected to see."

"A giant would suit you better, perhaps!" the hunter retorted, with a very perceptible sneer.

"Well, no, not that exactly; but you look more like a girl than a man fitted for desperate deeds."

"Try me and you will find that I am no girl."

"I want a guide," said the other, bluntly.

"A guide, eh? That is not my business; I'm no guide."

"I was told in the town that you were well acquainted with the upper country."

"What upper country?" There was nothing

insolent in the words but there was, decidedly, in the manner.

"The country about the Basaltic Buttes."

The Red Gold-Hunter sat bolt upright in the hammock and glared at the stranger for a moment in evident amazement.

"The Basaltic Buttes!" he exclaimed; "and what do you want there?"

"What business is that of yours?" the stranger answered, imperiously. "Since you are no guide, to use your own words, it can't matter to you what I want there."

The other looked at the bold speaker in evident anger and now for the first time the stranger had a good view of the cave-man.

As we have said, he was slenderly built, womanish in form and feature and yet withal as supple as a willow and as strong as steel. He was evidently a half-breed, his face was long, the cheek-bones prominent, sure sign of the Indian blood; he wore his hair quite long after the fashion of the red-skins, and was arrayed in a full buck-skin hunting-suit, handsomely ornamented.

Despite his youth and slender appearance, he betrayed the master in every movement, and one used to being obeyed, too.

"You are a bold speaker, sir!" the half-breed exclaimed, with a scowl; "I take it that you are a stranger in these parts."

"Quite correct."

"And I reckon that you don't know much about the men who are generally called the Red Gold-Hunters?"

"Not much," replied the other, laconically.

"There are three of us, John Mustang, the chief, that's myself—the Arizonian dead-shot; Pedro Cabeza, the Strangler, so called because in a quarrel he once took a man by the throat and squeezed him ready for a funeral; Michael Saltado, the Knife—thus termed because no man that ever trod this land has been able to stand up before him in single fight with that weapon and live to tell of it. We three are as one; when we put our mark on a man he is as good as dead and buried."

The stranger burst into a scornful laugh; the boast amused him.

"What do you mean—why do you laugh?" the leader of the band demanded, in evident anger.

"I am amused at your description, that is all; you Spanish-Mexican-Indian bravos are renowned for one thing."

"And what is that?"

"Talk," replied the other, tersely.

Only with an effort could the half-breed restrain the rage he felt.

"And how do you call yourself?" he asked.

"Jack—" replied the other, and then he hesitated.

"Jack—Jack what?"

"Anything you like," responded the other, coolly; "it's of no consequence to me."

"Well then, Senor Jack, you seek something in the country of the Basaltic Buttes—gold, perhaps."

"Quite likely."

"You will not find what you seek and you will lose your life in the bargain."

"Oho! do you really think so?"

"Did you ever hear of Manga Colorado?"

"The Apache chief? Yes."

"The Basaltic Buttes are in his country."

"Then myself and friends will have to fight Manga Colorado," the other replied, quietly, as though to confront the great red chief was one of the easiest things in the world.

"Oh, you are mad; you do not know of what you speak! Manga Colorado can bring five thousand warriors into the field!"

"Yes, when he can promise the five thousand plunder enough to pay them for their trouble, but not before."

"Well, the Apaches stand in your way; and then, too, I and my brothers have a claim upon that country. We are on friendly terms with the old Apache chief, and he permits us to seek for gold amid the mountains."

"I presume that we shall have to fight you and your brothers, then?"

"Yes, we shall be obliged to wipe you out," and as he uttered the speech the speaker pulled at his cigarette in the most careless manner.

"Or else we shall be obliged to wipe you out," the stranger rejoined, quite as cool as the other.

"There is always a little doubt about these things, you know, until the operation is performed."

"True, there is a doubt, but all the advantages are on our side; we are acquainted with the country while you and your companions are not. We shall wait our chance and come down on you in some spot where it will be impossible for you to make a successful resistance. But, even supposing that you escape us—supposing that you escape Manga Colorado and his red warriors, and succeed in reaching the neighborhood of the Basaltic Buttes, then you will encounter a foe against whom all earthly weapons are useless."

"And who may this foe be?"

"The spirits of the dead warriors of the ancient tribes who haunt the buttes," replied the other, in a low and solemn tone.

"Oh, now you are putting it on too thick!"

"When you see you will believe!"

"Yes, when I see, but what will I see?"

"The signal-fires of the ancient warriors playing at night along the crags of the buttes; and on a clear night when the moon shines bright you will see their gigantic forms standing out in dark relief against the sky."

"A mirage fit only to frighten children!"

"Oh, wait! Do not believe me! Ask the men in the town yonder! They will tell you—and you should believe them for they are your countrymen—that no bold adventurer ever penetrated into the country of the Basaltic Buttes and returned alive to tell of it. In the mad thirst for gold which drives you North Americans crazy, parties have been made up to explore this unknown region, but disaster and death have always followed. Unseen foes have struck at them, gigantic rocks have come hurtling down upon their heads from the ragged cliffs above—rocks too big for mortal hands to move; their camp at night has been disturbed by strange noises; unearthly beings have stalked in among their sleeping forms despite the watchfulness of the picket-guard. You may talk as you please, you are a stranger—a greenhorn in this region, and therefore you laugh at a danger which you are unable to comprehend, but if you ever are bold enough to penetrate into the Basaltic Buttes country, and return alive to tell of it, you will know a great deal more than you do now."

"No doubt," replied the other; "that goes without saying, as the French have it; the longer a man lives, the more he knows. But I'm wasting time with you since you do not care to guide me."

"Not for all the wealth that is in the buttes would I risk my life there!" the half-breed exclaimed, emphatically.

"And your gentle companions, the Strangler and the Knife?" the stranger asked, "are they fully as great cowards as yourself?"

The eyes of the half-breed sparkled with rage.

"By the Big Bell of Our Lady of Durango!" he retorted, fiercely, "when I strike you one of these days, you will find out whether I am a coward or not!"

"You strike me, you whipper-snapper!" cried the other, in contempt. "Why, if you dared to be angry I'd take you between my thumb and finger and break you in two!"

The thin lips of the Mexican drew back and he showed his teeth like a dog when provoked to anger.

"Do not trouble yourself to rush to death; it will come to you soon enough," he said, in low, vicious tones.

"And from your hands?" the stranger asked, in contempt.

"Perhaps!"

"Take your weapons, come outside, and we can settle it now! I hate to be kept in suspense," and the stranger patted his pistol-holster significantly.

This coolness nettled the half-breed, who was never before talked to in this manner.

"What weapons do you prefer?" he asked, swinging his feet out of the hammock.

"Oh, that is immaterial," the other replied, with a very polite bow; "I leave the choice of weapons to you."

The Red Gold-Hunter regarded the speaker intently for a moment, rage written in every feature, and then, with a great effort, he controlled himself.

"After all," he said, casting his eyes upward, as if he was addressing some one in the roof of the cave, "why should I take the trouble to kill this man? Let him go; the spirits of the Basaltic Buttes will do the work without my aid."

"A wise conclusion!" suggested the stranger, sarcastically: "and now harkye, you young jackanapes: when you know me better you will find that I am not a man to be trifled with, and the first time I meet you in public, I'll put such an insult upon you that fight me you must, if you have blood, not water in your veins!" and with the threat the man departed.

CHAPTER III.

A BARGAIN.

THE principal hotel, saloon, gaming-house—for all three were comprised in one—of Big Walnut Camp, was called the United States. It stood close to the bank of the river opposite the fort which frowned down upon the town.

At nine o'clock on the evening of the day of the interview between the stranger and the chief of the Red Gold-Hunters, in the bar-room of the hotel, close by an open window, sat a gentleman who is destined to play quite a prominent part in our story. He was a man of goodly presence, commanding figure, and although dressed roughly, like all the rest of the adventurers of the town, it was plain from his manner that he was a man somewhat superior to the others who filled the apartment.

This man was Bernard Dinwiddie—Captain Dinwiddie of the United States army, commander of the post known as Fort Bragg, as the little encampment upon the hillside was called.

The captain evidently courted concealment, for he had doffed his uniform for a rough suit, had pulled a well-worn slouch hat down over

his eyes, was sitting in an obscure corner and was trying to look as much like a miner as possible.

He was evidently on the look-out for some one, as he kept a close watch upon the passers-by through the window.

At length his scrutiny was rewarded, for a big brawny fellow, all wrapped up in a blanket like an Indian, came slouching past and nodded slightly to the captain as he went by the window.

Dinwiddie at once left the saloon by the rear door and followed the man.

The other proceeded straight on through the town, looking neither to the right nor left, until he had passed the lighted up part and arrived at a place vailed by the darkness of the night; then he halted for the captain to come up.

It was not a very dark night, and there was ample light for the two to see each other's faces.

The remains of a log-cabin which had been destroyed by fire was near at hand, and the captain motioned the other to be seated.

The hint was adopted, and as he squatted down upon an old log he suffered the blanket to drop from around his person.

It was no wonder that he looked like an Indian, for he was one. A brawny red chief, short in stature, but built like a giant. All the horse-Indians look like Samsons when seated, but when they arise they present the peculiar appearance of six-foot bodies on two-foot legs.

This comes from their habit of almost living on horseback from early childhood, whereby the lower limbs are dwarfed.

A man well in years was the savage—a tough, muscular old warrior, with a mobile, expressive face wherein high dignity and low cunning were strangely blended.

No common man was this old warrior, evidently, and any old mountain-man used to Apache-land and its inhabitants would at once, without hesitation, have recognized the chief, for it was the great fighting-man of the wild region from whence came the Gila river, Manga Colorado, or, to translate the name, Red Blanket.

The captain sat down opposite to the chief, and for a few moments the two surveyed each other.

The savage was the first to break silence.

"My white brother sent for me, and I am here," he said.

"I am much obliged," the officer replied. "I sent you word that I wished to see you on urgent business, and as it was a private matter entirely between you and me, I did not care to have any one know that we had a conference, therefore I took these precautions to prevent any one from knowing that we have met."

"It is good; the red chief did as he was bid."

"To come then at once to business," the captain said, briskly. "You know John Mustang, chief of the Red Gold-Hunters?"

The chief looked at the officer for a moment in silence before he replied. It was plain, despite all his savage reserve, that he was astonished at the question.

"Yes, mebbe I know him."

"Well, I have a disagreeable task to perform in regard to that individual."

"How?"

"The Government wants him."

The chief looked puzzled.

"There are some cases of murder and rapine on the border laid at John Mustang's door."

"What is that to me?"

"You are his father—are you not?"

For a moment the chief was astounded, and he plainly revealed it in his face, but these red heathen have a wonderful control over their features, and the savage soon succeeded in calming down his face into its usual statue-like immobility again.

"Oh, no," he said; "Mustang John no son of mine."

"Well, I was informed that he was."

"Who told you?" asked the chief, quickly.

"Aha! that is my secret," replied the captain, laughing; he felt sure that the Red Gold-Hunter was the son of the chief, despite his denial.

A peculiar weakness Magna Colorado had had for white wives, as many a poor Mexican girl, torn from her home and friends to become the victim and slave of the red brute, had discovered to her sorrow, and the captain believed that the young half-breed was the issue of one of these forced nuptials.

"Well, s'pose he my son, what then?"

"I have orders to arrest him, at any cost."

The old chief showed his white, fang-like teeth for a moment.

"S'pose he my son, he go to Apache country and laugh at the power of the white chief," he replied, grimly.

"Yes, but if he fools around the settlements as he is doing now, I am liable to lay him by the heels at any time."

"Why do you tell me this?"

"Because I want to make a bargain with you."

"With me?" asked the chief, in surprise, and as he spoke he looked suspiciously at the officer.

"Yes; all I have to do is to report to headquarters that I have examined into these outrages, and that I am convinced John Mustang had nothing to do with them; that will settle it."

"And why do you trouble your head about the matter?" The savage was suspicious.

"Oh, I have an object, of course," the captain replied, frankly; "You have a very handsome daughter, Chito, and I have taken a fancy to her; I've no squaw and I don't mind taking her."

For a few minutes the chief hesitated to reply, and it was evident that he was debating the matter over in his mind, but so complete was the control that the savage had over his features that for the life of him the captain was unable to decide whether the proposal was agreeable or not.

Then suddenly the savage spoke:

"It is good! Chito Colorado shall be the white chief's squaw."

"But will she consent?" asked Dinwiddie, anxiously.

"She must or die!" This was settling the matter in true savage style.

"It is a bargain, then; let the girl come in to me and I will see that John Mustang comes to no harm." The officer arose as he spoke.

"When shall she come?"

"Whenever you please, but the sooner the better."

"She is up in the canyons now; it will take time to reach her."

"No hurry, but give me notice before she comes, so that I may have a lodge prepared for her. The bargain is understood, then?"

"Yes."

"Will you come up to the fort and have some whisky?"

The chief smacked his lips; as much as he hated the whites he did not disdain their fire-water.

"Soon I will come."

"All right; I will be ready for you. Until then good-by."

"Good-by," responded the savage, gravely.

The officer strode away and hardly had his tall form disappeared in the gloom when, cut from under one of the logs like a snake, wriggled a lithe, dark form. There had been a listener to the interview.

The new-comer seated himself upon the very same spot that the officer had occupied.

The wily Indian had mistrusted the captain and had arranged it so that the interview could be overheard.

If Dinwiddie could have seen the face of the eavesdropper he would have been much amazed, for the man who had listened under the log was John Mustang.

"You see I told you that the white chief had some weighty purpose in view when he summoned me to these lodges," said the old chief in the Indian tongue.

"And Chito, must she go and dwell in the lodge of this white chief?" the other questioned.

"For a time, yes."

The old brave glanced around him cautiously before he replied.

"What keeps the Apaches from driving the white men out of this valley?"

"The fort upon the hillside armed with the big guns."

"Chito will go to that fort; she will make a fool of the white brave, and some night when there is no moon and all is as dark as the river when it flows through the big canyons, she will open the door to the red braves and they will take the scalps of the blue-coated warriors, and then afterward drive these digging white men from the Apache land forever!"

It was a deep-laid scheme; the savage had been brooding over the matter for some time, trying to form some plan by means of which access could be gained to the fort, and now accident had befriended him.

"There is a beautiful white squaw in the fort," the young man said, and the old brave licked his lips as he listened.

"It is good; the wigwam of Manga Colorado holds no white squaw there now; there is room for one."

"There are five gold-hunters camped outside the town who talk of going to the Basaltic Buttes."

"The Apaches will give their bodies to the wolves before they are half-way there," the old chief responded, fiercely.

CHAPTER IV.

A TRUE MOUNTAIN-MAN.

"I'm the dancing bear of the San Juan!" sung a hoarse voice pealing out loud on the clear mountain air. "I'm the tiger-cat of the Rio Pecos—the shark-mouth gar of the big Colorado."

"Hyer I am, as you may diskiver,
All the way from Roaring river."

An' my name is Paddy Mack, the milk-man,

whoo—whoo—whoo! Set 'em up again!"

A giant in a dirty red shirt, dancing down the main street of the town in the most comical and ludicrous way, and howling at the top of his lungs, and although his antics attracted quite a crowd, yet all the bystanders were wise

enough to keep out of the way of the giant, for it was plain that he was on mischief bent, for he was armed to the teeth. A big knife, thrust through the belt of untanned leather that girded in his stalwart waist, two heavy revolvers, swung in holsters at his side—no toy weapons, but tools for real work where a man's life might hang upon the sureness of his aim, and the excellence of his shooting-irons.

And no mere frontier bully, either, was the owner of this equipment, as was plainly apparent at a glance, but a true mountain-man fresh from the perils and dangers of the almost trackless wilderness, where the fierce wild beast, and equally fierce red warrior roamed as lords of the soil.

The stranger—for Big Walnut Camp had never seen his face before—had but just come to town; he was rolling in wealth, for he had displayed a bag full of nuggets, when, in the most generous manner, in the first saloon which he had struck, he invited all the boys to take something at his expense. He was a stranger to the Camp, and the whisky, like a good Samaritan, took him in.

The mountaineer had "sampled" many a flask of corn-juice in his time, but as he remarked afterward, for liquid lightning, Big Walnut bug-juice raked the board.

He had "filled up" speedily, and had gone on the war-path just as soon as he had got his cargo on board.

To go on the war-path in the border towns, in the time of which we write, meant that the festive soul who panted for "fun" took up a position in the center of the main street, proclaimed that he was "chief," and dared one and all to dispute his title.

Generally the challenger did not have long to wait, for there was always sure to be some other bold spirit around who "waded in" and "climbed" the chief, just for the *fun* of the thing.

But on this occasion the size of the man, as well as the plainly apparent fact that he was an old mountain buffer, deterred the crowd.

So up and down the street he strutted, no one daring to say him nay.

"Oh, come out hyer, some of you grinnin' chessy-cats, and lemme tan your hides for you!" he howled, cutting that intricate figure known as the pigeon-wing high in the air as he spoke. "Hyer I am, all of me, the blue monkey of Taos! the striped pig of Guyamas! the double-jointed, knock-kneed elephant of the Mogollon range. For the love of human goodness will some critter with a soul in his bosom come out and feel of me once, jest grip me and see if I am made of glass or sheet-iron?"

Some one snickered outright at this idea, and the giant made a charge on the scoffers, who scattered in quick order, but a man coming out of the general store near by, entirely ignorant of the scene that was transpiring outside, came full tilt into the big boaster's clutches, who at once set up a yell of delight.

The new-comer's arms were full of bundles, articles which he had just purchased, and as he had all he could do to hold on to them, he couldn't very well show fight, and so allowed the other to drag him into the center of the street.

He was a well-built, muscular fellow, and although not near the size of the giant, yet looked as if he could give him a pretty good tussle.

"Hold on; what are you about?" the man exclaimed, in expostulation.

"Drop your plunder, stranger, and grip me jest once for the love of goodness!" the giant howled.

"Let go of me, you drunken fool!" the man cried, in a rage. "I've got some eggs here, and if you smash 'em, I'll be apt to get wrathy."

"Wrathy!" yelled the big man, delighted, "that is jest what I want. I'm sp'iling for a leetle fun—not much, you know, but jest a leetle, jest to keep my blood stirring. Lemme see them eggs!" and with the word the giant got his big paw on the eggs and crushed them.

Now to lose eggs, warranted fresh, and worth a quarter of a dollar apiece, is no joke; so the stranger was as good as his word and immediately got wrathy.

With wonderful quickness and power he shook himself loose from the grasp of the giant, dropped all his bundles except the one containing the shattered eggs, and with that he smacked the big fellow full in the face, plastering the broken eggs over his eyes, nose and mouth, so that the man presented such a ridiculous appearance that the crowd roared themselves double with laughter.

The challenger was astonished and bewildered by the sudden and unexpected attack.

He commenced to paw the sticky mass from his besmeared visage, and his adversary, quick to improve the chance, seized him by the collar, wheeled him around, and before the mountaineer could comprehend this new mode of attack, he booted him down the street with half a dozen good, hearty kicks.

As a bystander remarked: "Every time he hoofed him he jest raised him about a foot, you bet!"

The crowd fairly howled with delight; it was the best kind of a circus Big Walnut Camp ever had seen.

"Go in, lemons!" yelled one.

"What's the price of shoe-leather?" asked a second.

"Ain't you glad you came to town?" sung out a third.

But, after the laugh, the crowd held their breath; this excellent farce might prove to be only the prelude to a terrible tragedy, for the muscular stranger did not lack for weapons, and after booting the giant so vigorously, he placed himself on the defensive with his hands on his revolvers.

Then the crowd began to scatter; doorways, dry-goods boxes and even awning-posts were at a premium, for two to one the first man hit when the fight began would be some innocent spectator.

But, when the big man did turn, wiping the sticky stuff from his face and beard, in a dazed, bewildered sort of way, instead of instantly whipping out his revolvers and opening fire, he put his arms akimbo and looked fixedly with a face full of astonishment at his nimble foe.

"Durn my oats!" he cried, "if I ever heered of sich a way of fighting afore! Say, you don't give a man no show for his money! Blamed if I don't think that you got swindled on that air hen-fruit, too, for one of 'em smells worse nor a pole-cat. Say, who are you, anyway?"

"What is it your business?" demanded the other.

"Wa-al, I didn't quite catch your name when you introduced yourself to me jest now. You see, I'm awfully bashful on fust acquaintance. Who may you be? Spit out yer handle, stranger, that is if you ain't got no call to be afraid of it."

"That is my business and none of yours," the stranger retorted. "And since you are so eager to know my handle, why jest call me Jack, that will do as good as anything."

"Jack what?" the big fellow demanded. "Thar's a heap of Jacks in this hyer world. I've knowed a Jack Rabbit, a Jack—wa-al, I don't want to offend anybody, so we'll say a John Donkey."

"Been introduced to yourself, old man, hav'n't you?" exclaimed one of the crowd.

But the giant paid no attention to the interruption.

"No, sir-ee! Jack won't do. I want something afore or after Jack!" and then, for the first time, he caught a good full view of the face of his antagonist, and saw that the features of the stranger were bronzed nearly as dark as an Indian's. "I'll give you a handle!" he cried, abruptly, "one that fits you to a T, too. *Bronze Jack!* There you are, old man!"

The crowd echoed the name.

"*Bronze Jack!*"

Well, it certainly did fit the stranger.

"And now, Mr. Bronze Jack, if you'll have the kindness to step up to the captain's office and settle," the giant continued, "I want you and this hull town to understand that I never was raised jest to have shoe-leather used up upon me! I'm fit for something a heap sight better, I reckon, and if I ain't I'll go and carry swill to the hogs. Now, then, I'm your man, any way you choose to call the game; what will it be? Nominate your we'pons, knives or pistols, but no fists, as I reckon that you know a heap sight more at that game than I do."

"You are drunk, man, and it would be simply murder for me, in full possession of my senses, to encounter you."

The mountain-man fairly leaped up two feet in the air and cracked his heels together after the old Virginia fashion.

"Drunk or sober!" he cried, "I'm any man's mutton. Look hyer!" He tore the old sombrero from his head and sent it whirling up into the air, then as it reached its altitude and quivered for a moment preparatory to coming down, with a dexterous throw he slung his heavy knife up after it, and the point went clean through the hat crown. "That's the mark of Big Bill Williams, and that's the kind of rooster I am!"

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNEXPECTED INTERRUPTION.

The announcement of Williams's name excited immediate attention. Not a man was there in the crowd but was well acquainted with the old scout and trapper by reputation.

Of all the wild men who have ever tramped the lonely trail of the pioneer over the vast prairies of the Far West, Big Bill Williams stands out pre-eminent. One of the first and one of the greatest of the early explorers, the name of this celebrated scout will remain while grass grows and water runs.

Even Bronze Jack seemed interested, although to all outward seeming he was one of the cold, quiet men who possess such wonderful control over themselves as to seem most impassive when most excited.

"Drunk, am I!" shouted the old scout, as the battered hat came tumbling down to the earth with the knife sticking through the crown. "Mebbe I am drunk! I'll allow that I have been filling myself up with fire-water, but what of that? Never yet was old Bill Williams so overcome by conversation-juice that he couldn't keep his end of the pot a-b'ilng! Show me a

man in the crowd that can drive a ten-inch knife through a hat up in the air as clean as I did jest now; and with a pistol I reckon that I won't take a back seat for any man on top of this hyer earth! Throw up a dollar, some one of you boyees, and see the old man split a bullet on it!" and with the word, out came one of the scout's heavy revolvers.

The crowd had commenced to gather around the two again, but the instant Williams whipped out the tool they scattered instantaneously, for they all expected that the other would follow suit, and that the ball would begin.

But Bronze Jack never moved; he stood confronting the other, watching his motions but never making a sign.

"Come, young man, come! My we'pon is out; why don't you pull and go for me?" the scout demanded.

"Oh, no; you're a dead-shot, and now that I know who you are, I'm not going to quarrel with you."

"And ain't you a dead-shot, too?" asked the giant.

"Oh, I can hit the side of a house if it ain't too far off," the other answered, a slight smile playing upon his face.

"Get out! You are trying to play roots on the old man! Any man that can boot another as scientifically as you did me jest now, must know how to handle his we'pons; it's a nat'r'l impossibility for him not to know. You're a boss, you air. I say it, and I reckon that I ought to know, if any man does. I'm posted in this region, I am! Why, I lived hyer afore any of you boys was hatched. Yes, sir-ee. I came hyer so long ago that I'll be blamed if I ain't clean forgotten the year, but it was a mighty long time ago. Why, boys, when I first struck into the leetle valley, the mountains out yonder," and the speaker waved his hand toward the distant spurs of the Mogollon chain, "them air mountains war'n't half as big as they air now, and as for that leetle one yonder," and he pointed to the nearest peak, due north, "why thar wasn't nothing but a hole in the ground, whar that stands now. Oh, I've lived a heap of years I tell you. Come! is it fight or not?" he cried, in conclusion.

"Not, as far as I am concerned," the other replied, firmly.

"But you booted me—and it hurt, too, although I allers reckoned that I had a hide like a rhino-serious!" protested the old scout, in an injured sort of way.

"Blame yourself; you smashed my eggs and assaulted me without rhyme or reason," the other replied. "I took you to be a drunken vagabond and administered such chastisement as a man of that kind deserved for attempting to pick a quarrel with a peaceful man, an utter stranger to him, but if I had had the slightest suspicion that my antagonist was Big Bill Williams, allowing whisky to make a fool of him, why, I would have kept out of the affair if it had been possible."

"Say, boot me ag'in, stranger!" cried Williams, pathetically. "Boot me ag'in, stranger, for the love of Heaven, boot me ag'in! It didn't hurt half so much as it does to have you talk to me in this hyer way. I reckon that I have made a 'tarnel fool of myself, and that I ought to be kicked clean out of the Camp; but it was your fire-water hyer. I have sampled considerable in my time, but this hyer is jest old camphene every time. I axes your pardon, stranger, and we'll cry quits if so be as that air is satisfactory to you;" and Williams extended his huge paw as he spoke.

Jack grasped it heartily.

"Oh, it's all right, and if you feel anyway sore about the booting, you are at liberty to use up some shoe-leather on me!"

"No, sir-ee! But, I say, pardner, to put it to you mildly, draw it lighter next time."

The crowd seeing that the fun was over, began to depart, and two men coming down the street, in avoiding the stragglers who were proceeding up, came face to face with Big Bill Williams and Bronze Jack.

A cry of astonishment burst from the lips of the old scout as he gazed upon the features of one of the men who, Indian fashion, had a big blanket wrapped around him, although the evening was quite warm.

The man, who was a stalwart-built fellow although low in stature, started as he came face to face with the old scout and saw that he was recognized.

"For the love of goodness, if this hyer ain't what I've jest been sp'iling for, for many a long day!" the old mountain-man exclaimed fiercely.

"Oh, you copper-colored snake! didn't I tell you the last time that I ever see'd you up in the mountains, the time would come when I would meet you face to face and have a chance for to give you a piece of my mind without risking my sculp by doing it?"

The loud tone in which the old scout spoke attracted the attention of the passers-by, and imagining that another scene was at hand they began to form a circle around the old mountain-man and the two unknowns, who would have avoided the interview had it been possible.

"Oh, you old dirty, copper-colored nigger, you!" and old Bill shook his brawny fist in the

face of the short man, who uttered a snort of rage.

"Stand back, you drunken ruffian!" cried the other one of the two, drawing a pistol; but before he could raise the hammer Bronze Jack had him "covered" with one of his revolvers. He had recognized the speaker on the instant and was glad of a chance to get at him.

"Hold on, my young friend!" he exclaimed; "don't you attempt to fool with that plaything or I shall be obliged to drop you just where you stand!"

In sullen rage John Mustang—for it was, indeed, the chief of the Red Gold-Hunters in person—glared at the cool speaker, who had him at a disadvantage.

"Strip off your blanket, you 'tarnel red snake, and let all these gentlemen look at ye and see jest what sort of a p'isone critter you are, anyway!" the old scout cried, and with the word he plucked the blanket from the shoulders of the man, and falling, it revealed a person in full Indian rig.

The citizens gazed upon him in astonishment, and they recognized at once that this Indian was no common brave.

"Don't you know him, fellow-citizens?" Williams yelled. "This hyer is the 'tarnel critter that claims to lord it over all this hyer country. The last time that I see'd him he had me foul and fast in his big village on the great Colorado, and they were a-going to roast me, jest to make fun for the squaws and their nigger babies, but I knew a trick worth two of that, and I gi'n 'em leg-bail. I told this heathen buck then that my turn would come, and so it has, and now it's his place to face the music. Take a good look at him, fellow-citizens: this is the bloodiest tiger of them all—Manga Colorado!"

A solemn hush fell upon the crowd and they all peered eagerly at the Indian in order to assure themselves that the brave really was the great chief of the Apache nation.

Quite a number in the throng were well acquainted with the savage, than whom the whites had no bitterer foe; and now, pressing forward, they were enabled to get a good view of both his face and form. Sure enough—before them stood the chief of the Colorado river Apaches, old Manga Colorado, a name swelling with terrible significance, since it was reported that he had received the appellation, not because he wore a red blanket, but because the blanket, originally white, had been stained crimson with the blood of his foes; nor was it any secret that the chief had openly boasted that for every ounce of gold the white men dug out of his territory he would have an ounce of blood!

"Come! I'm the meat-ax to do you justice!" the old scout exclaimed, lustily. "I'm the man that can peel the red hide off of you, and let folks see that you ain't anything but clear wolf underneath. Out with your we'pons and come for me, for the love of Heaven!"

CHAPTER VI.

A MODERN SERPENT OF THE NILE.

No braver man than the old Apache chief, but he did not evince the least intention of accepting the rude challenge of old Bill Williams.

The Apache, like the tiger, always tries to leap in the dark, and take his foe by surprise, and when his attempt is baffled, he thinks there is no disgrace in taking to his heels and decamping as fast as his legs can carry him. But, corner the son of the wilderness, and he will fight as desperately as any beast.

"The white man is crazy with fire-water!" exclaimed the red-skin, drawing up his blanket around his massive form again with true savage dignity. "Let him go to his lodge and sleep off the drink, and then he will think twice before he dares the rage of the Apache chief who has taken more scalps than the white man has fingers and toes."

"That's jest it! that's the p'int!" cried the scout, vociferously. "That's what I'm gitting arter! It's cos of them sculps that I'm anxious to clean you out, you saffron-colored imp of darkness! An' how did you take them, you no-souled, pigeon-toed, flat-footed, knock-kneed son of a prairie rattlesnake?"

The chief now glared with features distorted with rage, but made no answer.

"Oh, you're a heap of a big warrior, you air!" Williams continued, "when you've got your red imps round yer and yer air 'bout ten to one, but when it comes to a fair fight, man to man, and we'pon to we'pon, you ain't anxious for it. You boast of se'u'ps! Why, you never took a sculp in your life in a fair fight! No, sir-ee! You allers jump onto your game ten to one and nary sight does the poor pilgrim ever git for his money! Talk 'bout sculps! Why, you ain't got none 'cept women's and children's! Wah! Your lodge at home in the mountains is all hung round with sculps, ain't it?"

"It is!" cried the old warrior, fiercely; "white men's scalps!"

Many a bearded face in the crowd grew dark, and many a brawny hand clutched a weapon.

"You lie, you 'tarnel red skunk!" cried the mountain-man, promptly; "nary a man's sculp have you got; all gals' and boys'; but, as for me, I can show you a sight in my wigwam that

will make you open your eyes and sw'ar till your teeth drop out. I've got a bushel of 'Pache ears! nice fat ears that I sliced off 'Pache heads arter salivating the owners; got 'em nailed up on the walls for pin-cushions! But you're the meat that I've been a-hungering arter for ever so long! You're my mutton, and now I'm for you! I ain't forgot the time when you had me foul up in your village in the mountains. There was fifty of you red imps ag'in' me if that was one—'round me, thicker'n 'skeeters in a swamp, and you were a-gwine to roast me, for the fun of the thing, jest to make sport for your squaws and your young devils, but I'm part eel whar I ain't alligator or grizzly b'ar, and I slipped outen your fingers; but now the day of reckoning has arrived; so peel off your blanket and lemme whale you! It's your sculp or mine this time."

Of all men in this world Big Bill Williams was most noted and feared by the wild red brave; the strange manner of the scout, his utter contempt for danger, his wild, reckless feats made him inscrutable to the simple-minded savages. At times, indeed, the big mountain-man did act as if he was a little touched in the upper story; and so, although taunted and dared, the Apache chief hesitated to accept the challenge.

"Mebbe you think you won't have fair play!" Williams continued, finding that the other hesitated, "but you will. I'm a stranger in this hyer town—never set foot in it 'til 'bout an hour ago. You'll get a heap sight more fair play than a white pilgrim would up in your region from the bucks."

"You shall have fair play, I'll vouch for that!" Bronze Jack exclaimed, "and if this side-partner of yours is agreeable," and he nodded to Mustang John, "he and I can have a set-to just to make the thing interesting."

The young half-breed scowled, but the bystanders, by their looks, plainly expressed their approbation.

The red chief, though, was not to be bullied into an encounter, so he drew himself up in scorn.

"The white man talks big now," he said, "because he knows that Manga Colorado is not upon the war-path. The Apaches have smoked the pipe of peace with the pale-faces—"

"Oh, yes!" the old chap interrupted, with a snort of contempt, "you're a heap peaceful when the odds are ag'in' you, but I reckon that if you and your bucks caught me up in the wilderness you would be mighty apt to go for me tooth and nail, peace or no peace!"

"The chief is here under a safeguard, and you will have to answer to the military authorities for this attack!" the half-breed cried, angrily, to the scout.

"Sakes alive! You don't say so!" retorted Williams, in pretended amazement. "And who may you be, you little copper-colored popinjay, that you stick your lip into this hyer matter that don't consarn you at all?"

"My name is John Mustang!"

"Oh, I've heered tell on you! You're one of the Red Gold-Hunters, Injun spies, hoss-thieves and scalywags ginerally!"

The face of the young man grew fairly livid with passion, but he was helpless to avenge the insult, for Bronze Jack held him fairly covered, and he felt sure that the slightest attempt to draw his weapons would most surely prove his death.

"Oh, we have been fooling 'bout this job long enough!" the old scout cried, apparently spoiling for a fight, and with this word he drew back his hand and gave the Indian chief a violent buffet full in the face—a powerful blow, although delivered with the back of his open hand, and the old chief staggered back a yard or more.

The insult was quite enough; never before in all his life had Manga Colorado had such an affront put upon him.

With a wild, fierce cry of rage he plucked the long, keen-edged scalping-knife out of his girdle; the old mountain-man, disdaining the use of his firearms, whipped out his knife the moment he saw the savage grasp at his, and a bloody fray, which most surely would have ended in the death of one or both of the contestants, seemed certain, when a new-comer, who, at the instant, just reached the scene, mounted on a beautiful spotted mustang, a true "calico" horse, spurred the steed right through the crowd, and in between the two angry men, thus most effectually preventing them from coming together.

"Make way—make way!" the rider cried imperiously, as the mustang plunged into the crowd.

A clear, deep voice, strong and sweet as the tones of a silver bell, and one, the like of whose music seldom trembled on the breezy mountain air.

Little wonder that the crowd gave way; little wonder that the enraged savage, goaded almost to madness by the affront put upon him, and the big mountain-man, a very giant among scouts, burning with the remembrance of the wrongs of a dozen years, and panting for the life-blood of his savage foe—little wonder they both should hold off their hands at the stern and abrupt command of the rider.

That rider was a woman:

Cleopatra Dinwiddie, the sister of Captain Dinwiddie, the commander of the post.

A most magnificent creature indeed she was, strikingly like her brother in appearance, fully as tall as he, with the same jet-black hair, peculiar white face and proud, aristocratic cast of features, far better-looking as a woman than he was as a man, for that appearance which seemed weak and effeminate in him, suited her exactly.

A proud, sensuous beauty, haughty as a queen, self-willed as the ancient Egyptian princess whose name she bore; in brief, she was another Serpent of the Nile come again to earth, a creature fitted to make men mad, and yet as cold as ice without, although bearing within her veins all the lava fire of the hot-blooded Virginian race from which she came.

It was a very striking tableau, indeed, when she spurned her fiery spotted mustang, which she managed with infinite grace, in between the two men, who, knife in hand, were about to spring upon each other with the fury of tigers.

With uplifted whip and imperious face she commanded obedience, and the two foemen, glaring upon her, held off their hands.

Big Bill Williams in utter astonishment, for he hadn't the least idea who she was, and the savage chief in eager, gloating admiration, for this was the white squaw upon whom he had fixed his covetous eyes, and in regard to whom he was scheming so shrewdly.

How strangely fate works sometimes!

Here was proud, beautiful Miss Dinwiddie interfering to protect the man who coolly contemplated doing her a most fearful wrong. Little doubt, too, that her interposition saved the life of the Apache chief, for big and muscular as he was, old Bill Williams was bigger and more muscular still, and report said that that man's foot had never trodden Western soil who could hold his own with the old scout in a knife encounter; but, even if the chief had succeeded in conquering the scout, it is safe to say that some other hand would have avenged him.

"Throw down your knives!" she cried. "And you, stranger, are you not ashamed to attack this friendly chief?"

CHAPTER VII.

A WOMAN'S WILL.

FOR a moment the old scout was puzzled; he was not used to talking to women, and least of all to any such magnificent creature as this peerless beauty of the spotted mustang. With a man Big Bill Williams was never at a loss for words; in fact, he was rather noted, in the mountain region, for being possessed of an uncommon long tongue, for the scouts, as a general rule, are an exceedingly taciturn set of men. The solitary lives they lead, oftentimes playing the hermit in the wilderness for weeks and weeks together, no man near, save the savage red-skin, who would soon have made short work of the intruding white, if the savage chief could have succeeded in getting his clutches upon the bold, brave fellow who had taken his life in his hand and dared the perils of the trackless land.

"Why, marm, I—that is to say—darn my cats! this hyer mean clump of a red buck ought to be clean wiped out! It would really be doing a service to this hyer country!"

The old mountain-man was not the only one impressed by the splendid appearance of the beautiful girl.

The eyes of Bronze Jack dilated widely as he gazed upon her, evident admiration written upon his face; much had this cool and hardy adventurer seen of life, but in all his experience, from the time when he had trod gay Broadway—great Gotham's magnificent artery—through all his wanderings to the Californian shore, had he ever set eyes upon a finer specimen of womankind.

Dame Nature, surely, in forming the peerless Cleopatra had worked with all her craft and skill.

But, beautiful as was the girl, and sudden and unexpected as was her appearance, yet it did not produce the same effect upon the young man as upon the old scout.

He was not at all confused, and at once proceeded to explain matters.

"Miss, you don't know what you are talking about!" he exclaimed. "This Indian is the bloodiest red butcher that ever trod the soil of earth!"

"And even if that be true, is it any reason why he here, alone and helpless, should be assaulted and murdered?" the girl replied, spiritedly. It was plain, from the way in which she looked at the young man, that she was amazed and had detected in him something different from the men who generally people frontier towns.

"A fair and squar' fight, marm, as I'm a living sinner!" exclaimed the old scout, earnestly. "Oh, you don't know this old heathen buck! Oh! he's a tiger-cat, I tell you! but I'm the very he-critter that kin pull his claws in spite of his teeth! He's the old he-b'ar of the Colorado, but I'm the grinning blue-tailed monkey of Casa Grande, and I kin swallow him, feathers, blanket and all!"

"That's it, exactly, miss," the young man

hastened to say. "It is a fair fight, and Heaven defend the right. If the situation was changed—if my friend here was in the village of this chief, alone, single-handed, do you suppose that he would be shown any fair play? Do you for a single instant suppose that any savage warrior would dare him to fair fight? Oh, no! They would pile on him, ten to one; even the boys and the squaws would assail him, but we are giving this red heathen an extremely fair deal. My partner has challenged him to single fight; challenged him for cause, not for mere mischief, or for an idle wrong, but because he has suffered deadly wrong at the hands of this red tiger; and now that he is called to an account, who has a right to say that he shall not peril his life in the issue?" and as Bronze Jack made the direct accusation he pointed his forefinger straight at the warrior.

The speech made a deep impression upon the crowd, and murmurs of "That's so!" "True as preaching!" "You bet!" resounded. Even the proud Cleopatra was impressed, although she strove to conceal the fact. But she was strong-willed and used to having her own way; in fact, a complete spoiled beauty, and the opposition of the cool young man, who talked with all the eloquence of a paid advocate, annoyed her, particularly so because he was superior to the common run of men.

"It must not be!" she exclaimed; "it would be nothing but sheer murder to force the chief to fight, even though he does receive fair play!"

"Why, marm, he's jest sp'iling for a fight!" yelled the scout, anxiously. He was afraid that his prey would escape him.

"No, me no want to fight," spoke out the old warrior, instantly. He did not intend that there should be any misunderstanding on this point.

"Why should the great chief of the Apache nation fight the white man's scout?"

And from the tone of contempt in which this speech was uttered it was plain that the Indian did not consider that the old scout was his equal at all.

This "riled" Big Bill Williams at once.

"I'm a gentleman, I am, you mud-colored son of a rattlesnake!" and he shook his huge fist fiercely at the savage. "I'm your super-superior any time and any way that you want to take me! Do you hear that, you pisened ground-hog's grandfather? There don't a man walk on two legs, nor on four, on top of this hyer footstool that I ain't equal to, and I don't keer a copper cent what his color is, white, red, black or yellow, or mixed, a little of one and some of the t'other! You don't dar' to fight me! You're skeered clean out of your skin, you bull-headed rhi-no-serious!"

"White man talk—Injun laugh, bah!" and the old chief folded his blanket around him with an air of dignity almost undescribable.

The old scout was exasperated by this speech and action almost beyond endurance.

"For the love of Heaven, marm!" he gasped, "will you have the kindness to take your leetle spotted hoss out of the way, so that I kin chaw this critter up? It won't take me more'n two minutes, and I'm willing to bet a pile of skins as big as one of those mountains yonder, that I won't leave nothing of him arter I get through but a good-sized grease-spot!"

Again the savage grasped his knife and prepared for war, but, with an imperious gesture, the lady waved the old scout back.

"No, no!" she cried, "this quarrel must not proceed any further. This chief is here, under the protection of our flag—there is a treaty of peace between us and his tribe, and that treaty must not be violated."

"A heap sight this red skunk would care 'bout any treaty, or any of his tribe either, if they ran foul of a solitary white man up round his head-quarters!" Big Bill Williams growled. "His scalp would be in danger, I tell yer!"

And many a murmured assent went up from the crowd, too, at the speech, for few were there among the listeners who did not fully believe that Williams had stated nothing but the truth.

"That is no excuse for us!" the lady responded, instantly, firm in her purpose to save the Indian from the attack. "We must teach these savage men to keep faith by keeping it sacredly ourselves. Yield compliance, sir, to my wishes; if you are a true man, you will not do otherwise; put up your knife, and trouble this red chief no more."

Williams hesitated; it was plain that, eager as he was to square off the old account he owed the Apache chief, the interference of the lady caused him to waver in his purpose.

"Consarn it, marm, you ain't really got no call to interfere in this hyer matter," he muttered.

"Miss, you should retire!" Bronze Jack declared, boldly; "my friend is quite right; it is no concern of yours."

"I am the sister of the commander of this post!" Cleopatra exclaimed, proudly, her cheeks reddening with anger at the plain speaking of the other.

"This town is not a post," the young man replied, firmly yet politely. "This is Big Walnut Camp, and yonder fort upon the hillside is put there to guard us against the Indians, not to overawe and force the will of the men who

made the town. If you were the commander of the post in person you would have no right to interfere in this matter.

"We'll see about that!" cried a clear, arrogant voice, and a squad of soldiers, armed with muskets and headed by Captain Dinwiddie, came at the "double-quick" into the center of the crowd.

This was a surprise indeed, for not a soul in the throng had noted the approach of the troops.

CHAPTER VIII.

A BOLD DEFIANCE.

WITH a sudden rush the soldiers pierced the crowd and surrounded the Indian, thus hemming him with a ring of steel.

Manga understood well enough that the soldiers came as friends not as foes. It was a dexterous movement, extremely well performed; but, great was the disgust of the giant scout, and he openly expressed the feeling which the interference excited.

"Wa-al, darn my cats!" he ejaculated; "hyer have I been a tramp up and down for nigh onto forty years right on the frontier and this is the first time that I ever heerd tell on the sodgers interfering in a private quarrel."

"Or anybody else!" cried Bronze Jack. He was nettled, not only at the interference of the officer, but at the tone in which the other had spoken when he made his appearance on the scene of action. "I thought that the troops had been placed in the valley by the Government to protect the settlers from these red wolves, but instead of that I find that they are being used to protect one of the red butchers from being called to an account by a man whom he has wronged."

"You are a bold speaker, sir, and a somewhat rash one!" Dinwiddie retorted, not at all pleased at the hardihood of the stranger.

"Not a bit of it!" and Jack faced the officer, undauntedly. "I am neither bold nor rash; I only speak my mind and there is no law against it, is there, Mr. Soldierman?"

"Look here, my bold friend, you had better keep your tongue between your teeth or it may cost you dear!" Dinwiddie warned, in a rage.

"Oh, will it? Well, strange as it may appear to you, I am not at all afraid of *that*."

"That's the talk!" the old scout cried, emphatically. "What air we, anyway, free-born American citizens, or dogs to be walked over by the furst gent'lman in uniform that happens to run across us. I reckon that our forefathers fit, bled and died in vain if such a thing is to be."

An angry murmur went up on the air from the lips of the crowd at the conclusion of Bill Williams's protest. The interference of the military was not relished at all by the miners. Their blood was up for vengeance upon Manga Colorado, right or wrong.

"Who are you, anyway?" demanded Dinwiddie.

"Who am I!" yelled the old mountain-man, apparently vastly astonished. "Wa-al, if this don't jest rake my pile now, every time! Hyer's a sodger-man who don't know me! Why, I'm one of the old original settlers, I am! I've been the chief cook and bottle-washer of these hyer diggin's for an age of snakes! This old red buck knows me—mighty few of the red devils, old or young, but have scraped my acquaintance in the last ten years, and a good many of 'em are sorry that they did, too. Who am I? Ask the big crick of the North-west yonder that I furst diskivered and that bars my name. Thar's a good-sized bit of a hill not many miles from this hyer camp, that they call Big Bill Williams's mountain!"

"Oh, you are Big Bill Williams, then!" Dinwiddie exclaimed, gazing with curiosity upon the renowned scout.

"That's what they call me when I'm to hum and the latch-string hangs out."

"And who may *you* be?" the officer asked, turning to Bronze Jack.

"Oh, I'm nothing—a plain nobody, that is all," was Jack's indifferent reply.

"Bronze Jack, my pardner!" Williams announced. "and a man that's safe to tie to anywhere or anyhow."

"Well, Williams, now in regard to this matter," Dinwiddie expostulated. "You are too old a scout—too experienced a mountain-man not to know that faith must be kept with the Indians or else that blazes would be to pay all along the frontier. This chief has come into town to confer with me under a solemn safeguard, and to violate that safe-conduct, or to allow it to be violated, would be to set every red-skin on the border at once upon the war-trail. This must not be, and I ask you as a man of sense to give up this quarrel and allow the Indian to depart unmolested. Hereafter, in the open country, you can settle with the chief if you should choose to do so, but within the limits of this camp it must not be."

Dinwiddie had taken exactly the right way to talk to the old mountain man, for the scout was too well acquainted with the Indians and the condition of affairs along the frontier not to know that the officer was right in the view that he held.

"Wa-al, kurnel, I s'pose that you air 'bout right in regard to this hyer pesky affair," he ad-

mitted, reluctantly, "but I tell you it goes ag'in the grain—a heap ag'in the grain to let this pison snake go, now that I've got my hookers onto him."

"Come into my country!" exclaimed Manga Colorado, swelling up loftily, "and you shall have all the fight you want."

"Ah, but you red heathen never give a man a fair show," and the old scout gave a shake of the head. "You allers choose the battle-ground, allers contrive to pile in ten to one; but mebbe I will give you a leetle shake-up afore the summer is over."

Jack, seeing how the affair was tending, contented himself with keeping quiet. It was not his quarrel anyway, and since Williams was willing to cry quits he saw no reason why he should interfere.

The girl had watched Jack with an eagle eye; she had expected him to insist upon carrying out the quarrel, and with that inconsistency which is not strange to woman, was disappointed that he yielded.

"You have adopted a wise course," she said, addressing her conversation to the young man, "but I am sorry that my words had no influence over you, and that it required force to make you comply."

Jack only laughed.

"Oh, it was not my quarrel at all," he replied. "I only backed up my friend here, that is all. Since he is content to cry quits, why I can have nothing to say."

The girl tossed her head with a disdainful air; it was plain that the man angered her. She turned to the savage.

"Chief, when you return to your tribe I trust you will tell them that there are some of the pale-faces who keep faith with their red brothers."

"Manga Colorado will not forget, and in his heart he will always remember the words of the white lily," and, as the Indian spoke he fixed his glittering, bead-like black eyes upon her, an expression upon his face that instantly filled the heart of the proud, beautiful girl with intense oathing, for there was no mistaking the evident admiration of the savage.

She wheeled her horse around, and without another look at Jack, who was on the watch to catch her eye, for he was anxious to know whether she was angry with him or not, rode slowly away.

The Indian watched the girl as she rode off with an expression upon his face that fairly made the blood of Bronze Jack boil as he happened to catch sight of it. No wonder, for the young man rightly calculated that the wily, brutal savage chief meant harm to the girl.

"She shall thank me for her life some day," he muttered, between his teeth, "for this old villain will leave no stone unturned to get her into his power."

"Then I can consider this affair as settled," Dinwiddie said, addressing Williams.

"Yes, sir-ee, boss-fly!" the scout responded. "As far as Big Walnut Camp is concerned, I'm clean shut of this darned painted snake, but if I ever catch him on the perarie—"

"Manga Colorado will take your scalp and put it to dry in the smoke of his wigwam as a warning to all other white men to avoid the Apache land!" the old chief exclaimed, finishing the sentence.

"You be durned!" Williams cried, in contempt. "I'll have your hide one of these days and tan it for moccasins!"

The officer saw at once that he must put a stop to this idle talk or the chances were that the quarrel would be renewed again.

"Come, chief, I will conduct you to your horses and see you safely beyond our limits. Forward!" he said.

The soldiers started, the Apache chief in their midst, as proud and arrogant as though he owned the town, and in truth he thought he did.

"Give my love to your squaws, Manga!" Williams shouted, "for I'll make widows out of some of 'em afore long!"

CHAPTER IX.

A GUIDE AT LAST.

With the departure of the Indian the excitement ceased; Big Walnut Camp had had enough for one night.

Although the timely arrival of the soldiers had deprived the miners of the pleasure which they had anticipated enjoying at the expense of their ancient foe, great Manga Colorado, yet the two men who had so boldly dared the red-skins were heroes none the less.

Like the majority of frontier towns, the Camp knew only one way of extending hospitality.

"Strangers, you air both on you hefty men!" one old gray-headed miner exclaimed, taking it upon himself to be spokesman for the rest, "and we men of Big Walnut are proud to see you in our town; what will you drink?"

Rather needless this question, for though all the bar-keepers in the town always put it, yet when the thirsty stranger asked what they had, the reply, almost invariably, was "rye," and "bourbon," and it was a remarkable fact, that, whether the drinker chose the first or the last, one bottle always did service.

Big Bill Williams had already "sampled" all

the fire-water that he cared to try in Big Wal-lut Camp, and he did not hesitate to say so; Bronze Jack also attempted to excuse himself, but the crowd would not take "no" for an answer; and so, despite their protests, the two men were obliged to accept the hospitality of the miners, but they tore themselves away as soon as they could, and strolled down the street.

"Where are you bound?" Jack asked, after they had got out of ear-shot of the crowd.

"Nowhar's in particklar," the old scout answered. "You see, I've jist got in from a trip up in the mountains, and I'm my own man now until I pick up another job."

"You are a scout, by profession?"

"Yes, and trapper, and guide, and gold-hunter; thar ain't any kind of life in these hyer mountains that I can't handle."

"You're the very man I want. I am the captain of an expedition designed to penetrate right into the very heart of the Apache country," Jack announced.

"The Apache land, eh? Wa-al, I know it—know it like a book. Thar ain't hardly a squar' inch of it that I ain't tramped over."

"Just what I thought, and that is the reason I said you were the very man I want. Will you join my party as guide?"

"Stranger, I reckon I will!" was the hearty rejoinder. "The fact is, you're jist the kind of man to tie to; but whar air you going, and what is the programme?"

"Do you know the old ruined Yuma city, by the Colorado?"

"Do I know it? Wa-al, now, you can jist bet your bottom dollar on that. Many a time I scouted 'round that strange old pile, but I tell you what it is, Jack, my boyee, any party that goes into the Yuma country has got to be prepared to fight old Manga Colorado and his 'Paches, tooth and nail. The red bucks air kinder superstitious 'bout that old Yuma town; they've kinder got an idea, you know, that it's haunted land—the gateway to the Happy Hunting Ground, and it riles them awful for to have any pale-faces fooling around thar."

"Haven't the Indians got an idea that it is a rich mining country, and that if the whites once find it out, the scent of gold will attract them there in such numbers that it will be impossible for the reds to hold the land against them?" Jack asked.

"Wa-al, thar may be something in that, but it's a sure enough fact that bucks do believe that the place is haunted, and thar ain't many of the heathens as would be willing to do much scouting 'round the old Yuma town arter nightfall."

"And what do you think about the matter, Williams?" Jack queried. "Have you any faith in the yarn?"

"Wa-al, I don't 'xactly know," was the thoughtful reply. "I ain't much afraid of spooks, or any sich things, but I'll own up that thar air some things 'bout that old shebang that I don't understand. I was scouting in toward thar one night; the 'Paches had been running into me right hard, and I had taken to the timber along the river for safety, and all of a sudden, just as the darkness grew pretty thick, I came in sight of the old town. The 'Paches had been yelping at my heels pretty lively, but jist as soon as I got within sight of the old town, the yowling stopped. At the time I reckoned that they had got tired, and concluded to give the thing up as a bad job, but I found out, afterwards, that they were afraid to come any nearer to the old ruins for fear some of the spooks might gobble 'em up. Wa-al, as the yelling had stopped, I reckoned I might as well stay in the timber whar I was till the moon come up, so that I could see whar I was going—for I wasn't very well acquainted with the country then—for fear that I might run into a nest of the red hornets somewhar, 'cos I knew they were thicker 'round me than 'skeeters in a swamp. Wa-al, as I was a-sayin', I jist snogged in the timber like a pesky big snake, and when the moon come up, and I got ready to slide out, I happened jist by accident, you know, to look up at the top of the old Yuma tower, and, dog my cats! ef I didn't see a sight up thar that made my ha'r stand on end!"

A peculiar look upon bronze Jack's face revealed that he did not share in the superstitious fear of the other.

"What was the sight?" he asked.

"Wa-al, as near as I could make out—for I tell you, stranger, I didn't stop to get more than one good squar' look at 'em afore I made tracks like all possessed—that war a lot of devils, big and little, jest a-waltzing 'round on top of the old city."

"Devils, eh?"

"Yes, sir-ee!" cried Bill Williams, emphatically; "big devils and little devils, and the big fellers were whoppers, too! nine and ten feet high, and the little fellers were as broad as they were long. I heard a sharp from the East once—a feller that was just crazy about all sorts of rocks, and went 'round cracking at them with a hammer and a muttering a lot of gibberish that I couldn't make head nor tail of—get off a yarn 'bout how, a long time ago, men used to be a good deal bigger than they air now—reg'lar giants, for sure—and he allowed as how he expected to find one of their bones some day; and

he was just loony enough to say that if he found two or three bones he would be able to tell jest how big the man was, and a heap more sich trash. Wa-al, stranger, when I see'd the monstrous big devils a-marching 'round on top of the old city, I jist come to the opinion that the old Dutch cuss wasn't quite so badly cracked as he appeared to be, and the old Yuma chaps that built the big city were all a lot of giants, and that I was a-looking at their spooks."

As the old scout finished, he detected the incredulous look on the face of the other.

"Oh! I know that it's a tough yarn! If I hadn't a' see'd it with my own two looking eyes, I would have hoo-hooded at it myself as bad as anybody; but, stranger, as I'm a living and breathing man, I tell you it is a sure enough fact, and I'm willing to take my oath to it on a stack of Bibles as big as a meeting-house!"

There was no mistaking the fact that he fully believed every word that he said.

But Bronze Jack was most decidedly a "doubting Thomas."

"A man's eyes are not always to be trusted," he observed. "I've seen the mirage on the desert represent a troop of horsemen of gigantic size, and sometimes the horsemen ride upon their heads with their horses' feet up in the air, and although my eyes witnessed this sight, yet I know very well that it was an optical illusion."

"Tain't no mirage that I see'd!" Williams persisted, stubbornly.

"Well, partner, I propose to find out exactly what this thing is!" Bronze Jack declared. "I'm on the track of a rich gold deposit right close to the old Yuma city, if not in the very city itself, and I'm going there though the devils were thicker than fleas in a half-breed's hut. Now, then, will you go along as guide? You can name your own salary, or go along on shares, as the rest of us are going. I've heard this story about the ghosts of the Yuma town before, and I reckon there is some trick about the matter. In fact I'm much more afraid of Manga Colorado and his 'Paches than I am of the ghosts of Yuma city. Now, what do you say? Will you go along?"

"You bet!" cried the old scout, instantly. "I'm your man, and I'm willing to go cahoots in the plunder."

And so Jack got his guide, and a better one all Arizona could not produce.

And while this conversation was taking place, a no less important one was going on elsewhere.

After the soldiers escorted the old Apache chief beyond the limits of the town, they returned to the garrison. The half-breed chief, John Mustang, followed hard upon their heels, and took advantage of a favorable opportunity to accost the captain.

"Can I have a word with you on important business?" he asked.

"Certainly;" and Dinwiddie, falling back out of hearing of his men, signified that he was ready to listen.

Briefly, then, the half-breed told of the design of Bronze Jack to make an attempt to discover golden treasure in the Yuma country, and, in strict confidence, he informed the officer that he, John Mustang, knew pretty nearly the location of the treasure, and suggested that if, by any means, he could prevent the expedition moving for a week or so, in the interim, he, Dinwiddie, could send a force and seize the mine.

The officer, poor and proud, needed money badly, and at once jumped to the suggestion; besides, he already hated Bronze Jack, and was not sorry to balk his plans.

"Oh! I can manage that easily enough," he assumed; "I will attend to it the first thing in the morning. I'll hold them here for a week, at the least."

CHAPTER X.

THE CHALLENGE.

BRONZE JACK conducted the old mountain-man to where his expedition was encamped beyond the town and there introduced him to his associates.

Powerful, hardy fellows indeed were the adventurers. One might search all the Western land over, from the swift current of the beautiful Willamette to the tropical waters of the Mexican Gulf and not find better material for such an enterprise as they had entered upon.

The readers of the "Fresh of Frisco," will be apt to remember the three, who, as the Wolves of Tejon, played quite prominent parts in that "over true tale."

The three had changed very little since the time when, led on by the bold Fresh of Frisco, daring Jackson Blake, they had bearded the red-bearded alcalde in his town of Tejon Camp and rudely handled him and his bold fighting-men.

Black Jim Placer was still the same huge-bearded, good-natured giant; Spanish Pete still wore his sombrero cocked over his left eye and strutted along as bravely as in the old days when a thousand broad acres of the best land in all Lower California called him master; Colonel Bill still talked with his Yankee twang, "calculated" shrewdly, and seemed more like a down-east schoolmaster than ever.

Old Big Bill Williams was no stranger by reputation to these men, although none of them had met him before, but they received him with all honors. And the old scout, keen judge of men, instantly concluded that the party was composed of the right material, and that if any men could penetrate into Apache land, baffle old Manga Colorado and solve the mystery of the haunted Yuma city, these were the spirits to perform the feat.

With the rising of the sun, the next morning, the little camp was astir, breakfast was prepared, dispatched, and then the adventurers got ready for the start. No useless baggage impeded them; each man had his horse, his arms and ammunition, with a little dried meat and parched corn for food; his skill as a woodman must provide the rest.

As they prepared to depart, forth from the town came a troop of horse, and the sun glittering upon their arms and accoutrements revealed that they were soldiers.

The adventurers paused for a moment in their preparations to glance at the advancing horsemen, but not one of the party had any idea that the troop had aught to do with them.

The soldiers came straight up to the little camp.

There were eighteen men in the party, besides the corporal and the captain, for Dinwiddie in person commanded the troop.

As the troops came close to the adventurers, in obedience to a command of their officer, they deployed in skirmishing-line, and coming to a halt leveled their weapons.

The adventurers, however, were too well used to fields of war whereon life was lost and honor won, to allow the troops to take them at a disadvantage; and the moment the soldiers deployed into line, as though actuated by a common impulse, each one slipped nimbly behind his horse and using the body of the horse as a bulwark, leveled his rifle over the back of the steed.

It was really a pretty picture, although terribly suggestive of blood and carnage to come.

Twenty to five, four to one, and yet the advantage was not decidedly with the troopers despite the odds. The five resolute men ambushed behind their horses, armed with the best weapons, made an attack a dangerous experiment to try, as Dinwiddie well knew.

He had thought to take them by surprise, and secure them before they had a chance to spring to their arms, but now that he saw them, firm in battle array, he did not care or dare to use force.

"Throw down your arms and surrender!" he exclaimed, sternly.

"Oh, no!" Bronze Jack responded, his rifle aimed directly at the heart of the officer. "You just command your men to put up their weapons and draw off, or else I shall be obliged to make a vacancy in the United States army and give your lieutenant a chance for promotion."

"What?" said Dinwiddie, amazed, "do you dare attempt to resist the United States forces?"

"Yes, the United States forces or any other forces when they interfere in my business," Jack replied, boldly. "By what right do you attempt to arrest my party?"

The officer, in his arrogance, felt very strongly tempted to reply that it was by the "right of might," but as the game was not bagged yet, it was too soon to boast, so he adopted a milder tone.

"I understand that you and your party are about to proceed into Apache land."

"That is quite correct."

"There is a treaty of peace now between Manga Colorado and the United States Government."

Jack laughed, contemptuously.

"A treaty that Manga Colorado will regard scrupulously when he is in the white men's towns and threatened by their guns, but something that he and his tribe will forget all about if they can catch any of their white brothers alone in the wilderness."

"That is mere opinion!" Dinwiddie retorted, impatiently; "so far the old chief has lived up to the treaty."

"Well, what has that to do with us?"

"You are about to enter the domains of the Apaches with arms in your hands."

"We'd pesky soon lose our top-knots if we went without 'em, treaty or no treaty," growled Big Bill Williams.

"And I consider that it is my duty to prevent you from going," Dinwiddie continued, paying no attention to the interruption.

"Well, I may be prejudiced upon this subject, but I think this is a pretty high-handed proceeding!" Bronze Jack exclaimed, his eyes flashing, indignantly. "If the Indians respect this treaty, of which you speak, it seems to me it opens the Apache land to the white men."

"Your party going there with arms in your hands in search of gold, particularly after last night's trouble with the old chief, will be sure to enrage him, and the chances are a hundred to one that he will take the war-path against you."

"Well, that's our look-out."

"You will bring on a general Indian war."

"I doubt it! Besides, Manga Colorado would attack the frontier towns to-morrow if he thought that he was strong enough. You can't tell me anything about this old snake of a chief! He is a rascal of the deepest dye without the slightest particle of honesty."

"That has nothing to do with it! Will you give up this expedition?"

"Give up the expedition!" yelled old Bill in astonishment and indignation. "Why, kurnel, for the love of goodness! what do you take us for? Air we children for to be sent off home 'cos our leetle game don't please your high-mightiness?"

"No, sir! I will not give up my expedition, and don't acknowledge that you have any right to interfere in the matter at all. We are free American citizens going about our lawful business, and no man in the world has the power to call us to account!"

"That's so! Let the eagle scream!" supplemented the old scout.

"If you do not lay down your arms I shall order my men to open fire!" Dinwiddie cried.

"I should be very sorry, sir, to have you do that, for my men here are all dead-shots, and the chances are just about ten to one that we can whip your force, although you do outnumber us. But, captain, let's come right down to 'bed-rock' in this matter. You have some secret motive in this attempt to stop me; I reckon that there ain't any love lost between us, but neither my men here, nor your men there, have anything to do with the case. Let us fight our quarrel out ourselves without embroiling another soul. You have revolvers; so have I. You throw away your sword and I'll cast down my rifle. I'll mount my horse and meet you in single fight. If you conquer me, well and good; my expedition shall not start; but if the chance of victory is mine, then your men must draw off."

"A duel?"

"Yes; and which you must not refuse unless you fear to meet me!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE HOSTILE ENCOUNTER.

IT was a bold defiance and the officer saw no way of avoiding the encounter even if he had desired so to do.

In the wild regions of the West where every man is a law unto himself, a challenge to battle cannot very well be evaded without the loss of social prestige.

To the mind of these wild adventuring souls who, far from the haunts of civilization, seek for fortune in the land of the savage beast and the sometimes equally savage red-skin, the man who will not fight, when there is good reason so to do, is regarded in the same light as the mortal who will not drink: Heaven may have some use for such weak-spirited human but man has not!

And then, too, the captain thought that there was really more show for him in the single encounter than if he brought on a regular skirmish, for as matters stood the adventurers had most decidedly the best of the situation.

Making a virtue then of necessity Dinwiddie decided to accept the challenge.

"Although it is hardly the thing for a man of my rank to embroil himself in a private quarrel, yet on this occasion, since you put so bold a face upon the matter, I can't resist the temptation to give you a lesson," the captain remarked.

"And at the same time be prepared to take one," Bronze Jack responded, as cool as a cucumber.

The captain knit his brows; the bravado of the other annoyed him.

Irrepressible Big Bill Williams on this occasion found it impossible to keep quiet.

"Say, don't one of you good-looking soldier-men want to try a taste of my meat? I never could bear to stand and see fun going on since I was hatched without having a paw in the pie!" he exclaimed. "Come out, some one of you, and lemme have a hack at you jest for greens!"

But not a trooper evinced the slightest inclination to accept the invitation. They now knew the man too well!

The old scout was greatly disappointed and disgusted that none of the soldiers had any idea of accepting his defiance.

"It does beat all!" he muttered to himself; "a man kin generally pick up a fight in this world if he is really hankering arter it, but 'pears to me as if the kind of men in this hyer country had kinder changed lately."

"I am ready, sir, whenever you are!" Bronze Jack announced, "but let us have a clear understanding. Our single encounter is to decide the question whether our party goes or stays?"

"Yes, that is the understanding."

"Order your men then to put up their arms and mine will do the same."

That was at once done.

Then Bronze Jack cast aside his rifle, took a look at his revolvers, and leaped into the saddle. Upon his part the officer unbuckled his saber and gave it to his orderly, examined carefully his

pistols and then signified that he was ready for the encounter.

"Suppose we ride off a couple of hundred yards, turn, and then be free to fire?" the bronze man suggested.

"Very well, I'm agreeable."

Dinwiddie had very little apprehension in regard to the issue of the encounter, for he lacked neither courage nor skill; in fact he rather prided himself upon his skill as a revolver-shot, and many a time had boasted that his superior with the pistol he had never yet encountered.

Of course he presumed that his antagonist was also a pretty good shot, or else he would not have dared to risk a battle, but he felt perfectly satisfied that he was more than his match.

The two galloped off, while the adventurers and the troops watched them with breathless eagerness.

Both were well mounted, the steed of the adventurer, though, being a little the best, for, knowing that in the perilous enterprise in which he was engaged, his life might often depend upon the goodness of the beast he bestrode. Jack had selected his horse with the eye of a master.

And Jack was the first to turn, and then perceiving that his antagonist was not in readiness for him, he reined in his animal.

The captain wheeled, and, like the other, halted for a moment, and then, drawing his revolver, cocking it with cool deliberation, he set his horse in motion, at a slow trot. His antagonist did the same, but each reserving his fire.

The captain was going to try his favorite game, to wait till he got within deadly distance, and then with a sudden snap-shot end all.

But the adventurer knew a trick worth two of that, as the soldier soon discovered.

"Twenty more feet, and I'll settle this fellow," the captain muttered, but before the twenty feet were covered—just as if his antagonist had penetrated his design, there came a sudden flash, a report, a hiss of a ball, and then a sharp cry came from the officer, while his revolver dropped from his hand.

It was truly a marvelous shot, for without aim, Bronze Jack had put a bullet through the right arm of the soldier.

Not a serious wound, although painful, but quite sufficient to deprive the officer of the use of that arm.

A bitter curse came from Dinwiddie's lips; for the first time he began to realize that he was encountering no common foe.

The lookers-on were amazed, for it was about the finest shot any of them ever had seen, and as for old Bill Williams, he was dumbfounded.

"Dog my cats!" he muttered; "why this man don't have to take aim! Darn me, if I ever see'd such a thing before!"

After discharging the shot, Jack halted his horse as if to observe the effect.

The captain had also come to a standstill; he attempted to raise his arm, but found that the member was useless.

"I'm not satisfied!" he cried, harshly, fairly boiling with rage. "I demand an exchange of shots. I am not willing that the affair should be decided by accident!"

"No accident, sir," the victor replied; "I hit you exactly where I intended. I bear you no malice and do not seek for your life, although you have troubled yourself to interfere in my affairs, which do not concern you in the least. Understand, sir, I have spared your life; I could as easily have put the ball through your heart or your head as through your arm, had I been so inclined."

"I do not believe it!" Dinwiddie exclaimed, angrily. "The result of the shot was only accident, that was all."

"Well, if you insist upon a further trial, perhaps I may be able to convince you that your idea is not correct," was the significant reply, as with his left hand the captain plucked the other revolver from its holster.

"Going to use your left hand, eh?"

"Yes, sir! and I give you fair warning that I can use the left hand nearly as well as the right."

"So can I," responded the adventurer, at once shifting his pistol from one hand to the other. "Oh, I scorn to take any advantage of you! That is not the kind of man I am."

All gazed with astonishment upon this strange scene, and even the officer showed amazement at the action, for in the wild life of the border an advantage once gained is very rarely given up.

And now, with their weapons in their left hands, the foemen faced each other; not a hundred yards of space separated them.

The captain was deadly pale, for he was suffering terribly from the wound which he had received, and the loss of blood was beginning to tell upon him.

"Are you ready?" the soldier demanded.

"Ready!" was the prompt response.

Dinwiddie put spurs to his horse and galloped toward his antagonist, raising his pistol as he did so and taking deliberate aim.

Jack, on the contrary, never stirred, but, firm as a statue, or one of the giant cliffs that frown down upon the western canyons, waited the onset.

The captain delayed his fire to make assur-

ance doubly sure—an act fatal to his success, for, before he deemed it wise to pull trigger, again the sharp report of the plainsman's revolver, and again the bullet cut its way through the flesh of the soldier's arm—the left arm this time, and the pistol which he grasped so firmly dropped from his fingers as though it had suddenly become red-hot.

This was a more marvelous shot than the other, by all odds.

The captain, weakened by loss of blood, with a sullen groan dropped forward, fainting, upon the pommel of his saddle. The fight was over as far as he was concerned.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE INDIAN COUNTRY.

UPON seeing their captain reel and fall forward some of the soldiers rushed up; and not a moment too soon, for, just as they reached him, his strength entirely deserted him, and he would have fallen helpless to the ground but for their supporting arms.

"To horse, boys!" cried Jack, and in obedience to the command all of the adventurers vaulted into the saddle. "I suppose, gentlemen, you will all bear witness that this was a fair fight and the victory is honestly mine."

"Oh, yes," the corporal replied, "it was all fair and above-board," and the rest of the troopers nodded assent.

"I could have killed your leader if I had chosen so to do," Jack continued, "but I did not seek his life, and I bear no malice, although he has chosen to mix himself up in my affairs which do not concern him at all. He has merely fainted from loss of blood; bind up his wounds, and stop the flow, and in a day or two he will be well again, for neither hurt can be serious. According to the agreement myself and men are now free to depart. You have no objection?"

"Not the slightest," responded the corporal, "and, as far as I am concerned," he added, bluntly, "I'm mighty glad to get rid of you. I'm not hankering to put my spoon in your soup."

And in this his comrades decidedly agreed with him, as their faces plainly showed.

"Take care of yourself then; we'll see you again some day if old Manga Colorado don't take our scalps up in the Apache land!"

Then the adventurers rode off, striking into the northern trail that led directly to the hunting-grounds of the red chiefs.

The soldiers watched them ride off with wonder, but shook their heads gravely.

"Them chaps will make it warm for old Red Blanket!" one of the troopers averred, and the rest were of the same opinion.

The five dare-devils pushed forward at a brisk pace, for both men and beasts were fresh and many a mile they covered before they drew rein. At high noon they halted by the side of a mountain stream, full forty miles to the northward of Big Walnut Camp, and prepared to refresh themselves. They had gone at their best speed, for, as Jack had explained to Williams as he rode along, he had an idea that some subtle influence was at work to endeavor to detain them by throwing such obstacles in their way as would be apt to make their journey both difficult and dangerous.

And as the party drew rein by the streamlet Jack had just finished unfolding his ideas upon this point to the old scout.

"You can depend upon it," he said, "the captain had some urgent reason for attempting to stop the advance of our party, for that he cared two straws whether we became involved in a fight with the Apaches or not I do not believe. In fact, the way affairs look, the chances apparently are ten to one that the bucks will wipe us out."

"Wa-al, in regard to that air, I would rather pin my faith to a small party than a big one," Williams said, shrewdly.

"That is exactly what I think, and that is the reason why I selected so few men. With a small party like ours we may be able to slip into the Apache land without the knowledge of the reds, and that would be a most decided advantage for us!"

The old scout who was staring intently before at the northern horizon, smiled quietly just at this point, and Jack, who seemed to have eyes for everything, at once detected it.

"What's the matter?" he asked, briefly.

"The 'Paches know that we air hyer," Williams answered.

"So soon? The red-skins are well served, then, for certainly we stole a march upon them!"

With his brawny forefinger the old scout directed Jack's attention to a thin, faint column of smoke curling up on the air from the side of a distant hill.

"What do you make of that air, eh?"

"A camp-fire of some prospecting adventurers like ourselves, or else a signal given by some red sentinel warning the Indians of our approach."

"That's 'zactly what I make it, and if I ain't

wrong in ten minutes you'll see another one," Williams declared.

And he was right: within the time specified another thin column of smoke did arise on the air, a little north-west of the other.

"It is plain then that our advance is known."

"Yes, sir-ee, and the chances are big that we'll have the reds down on top of us."

Bronze Jack remained silent for a few minutes in deep thought, and then he spoke:

"Through yonder gap the direct trail to the old Yuma town runs," and as he spoke he pointed northward where there was a plainly perceptible depression in the mountain range, and near which the smoke column arose.

"True as shootin'!" Williams admitted.

"And the Apaches, on the watch, and warned of our purpose, will surmise that we intend to pass through the gap."

"Oh, not a doubt 'bout that!" the old scout decided; "and them leetle smoke signals, which air jest as clear as print to the red heathen, says, we've got the white men; come and go for 'em!"

"Suppose we remain here until night sets in, and then, instead of taking the direct trail north, strike off to the eastward, make a wide *d'tour*, and come into the Yuma region from the north-east?"

"While they air a-watching for us from the south?"

"Exactly!"

"It will do!" cried the old mountain-man, smacking his knee emphatically with the flat of his hand. "It's jest the very trick for to pull the wool over their eyes. They'll wait for us until they get tired, and then mebbe come outerly for to see what has become of us."

"And they will find no trace of us, for we'll go down the bed of the stream for a mile or two, where our horses' hoofs will leave no mark, and then, when we take to the land again we'll muffle their feet so as to obscure the trail."

It was really a capital idea, and when it was made known to the rest of the band they unanimously agreed that the plan must surely succeed.

The promptness with which the knowledge of their advance was communicated to the Apaches amazed Jack, and he puzzled his brains much over the matter.

"Can it be," he asked Williams, "that there is a secret understanding between the red-skins and some one in the town of Big Walnut?"

"No doubt 'bout it at all," the old scout admitted. "Why, the chances are 'bout t'n to one that that tawny-colored half-breed, Mustang John, as he calls himself, the chief of the Red Gold-Hunters, and this old 'Pache buck are in cahoots together."

"Yes, in that way the savage might have been warned."

Agreeably to the plan which Jack had formed the party rested by the side of the little stream until the shades of night melted mountain into prairie, and caused all visible objects to assume strange, wild outlines.

Once again the expedition went on. They followed the stream, the horses walking in its bed for over a mile; and then, taking advantage of a favorable spot, emerged from the water, first muffling with strips of blanket the hoofs of the steeds so that the trail would be "blinded."

There was no moon; and the stars afforded the only light, but, guided by Williams, who seemed to have the cat-like faculty of seeing in the dark, the party pushed rapidly on, and by midnight, by which time the moon was up clear and full, they had reached the wooded country through which ran the waters of the Little Colorado.

There they halted for the rest of the night and went into camp, if the scanty preparation which they made could be so dignified.

But despite the fatigue of the journey, Bronze Jack could not sleep.

From the nature of the country, being wild, wooded and rising here and there into lofty hills, the adventurer was possessed of the idea that, by scouting northward to the summit of one of these hills, a view of the "promised land," the far-famed Yuma country, might be obtained; so, telling the sentinel, Colonel Bill, whose turn it was to watch, of his idea, he cast his rifle in the hollow of his arm and wandered off up the ravine.

The moon afforded ample light for the trip. Some two miles Jack had gone from the camp, when, in turning an abrupt corner of the rocky formation, he came upon a sudden and fearful sight.

Right in the middle of the way crouched a monstrous grizzly bear, and before him, extended at full length upon the ground, either dead, or helpless through fear, was a young Indian girl of wonderful beauty, as the adventurer plainly distinguished on the instant.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE APACHE FLOWER.

To meet the grim king beast of the Rocky Mountain region is not particularly pleasant at any time, even though one may be mounted upon a good horse, and armed with the best of

weapons; this tyrant of the woods and rocks encountered in a plain where there is plenty of sea-room, is pretty apt to have matters his own way, but how much worse to come suddenly upon the fierce creature in a narrow, rocky ravine—to get within a dozen yards of him before the discovery is made that his royal highness is to the fore!

And this was Bronze Jack's predicament, exactly. To attempt to escape by flight was clearly hopeless, for the great mountain bear is a much better runner than a man, and Jack knew well enough that he would be overtaken and pulled down before he had gone a hundred yards, if he should undertake to play that game. True, the adventurer was well-armed, and well able to use his arms too, but very few men are there in this world who can boast that they had met the great northern bear in a single fight and lived to tell of it.

The adventurer, though, was in for a fight, despite the terrible nature of the foe; all the manly instincts that dwelt within his breast—and the plainsman was one of nature's noblemen, if one ever existed—told him that he must attempt to snatch the Indian girl from the power of the brute, whether she was alive or dead.

Small time was there for thought—little space for decision, for with a growl which displayed a set of fangs fearful to look upon, the brute stepped over the prostrate form of the girl and came waddling with its peculiar, uncertain gait toward the white man.

His revolvers were out in a moment; this was one of the times when a man's life depended upon the goodness of his weapons; a miss fire now was almost fatal.

Rigid as a statue Jack waited for the attack. Small use of firing until he was certain that deadly execution would be done.

One vulnerable point only of the bear did he know; the eye—the gleaming, bloodthirsty orbs of sight, but he thought that if the brute rose upon his hind legs, as the beast generally did when closing in, possibly at such a close range he might be able to reach the heart, despite the toughness of its skin.

Within about six feet the brute came, evidently perplexed by the bearing of the opponent who so boldly stood his ground, and then, with another fierce growl, he reared up on his hind legs.

The critical moment had come.

Jack opened fire at once. A ball he put through the left eye of the beast with his right-hand revolver, and the bullet of the left pierced the breast, tearing its way to the heart.

With a moan of pain, almost human in its expression, the monster sprung upon his enemy, designing to rend and tear, but the engines of death had reached its vitals and the onslaught merely crushed Jack to the earth. He did not fully realize how far gone the brute was, and believing that a desperate struggle was at hand he fired two more shots; but the bear was even then in the agonies of death, and soon gave up the ghost.

Bronze Jack arose to his feet, his clothing stained with the blood of the bear, and as he gazed down upon the prostrate king of the woods he understood that a triumph had been vouchsafed to him that fortune seldom grants to the hardiest borderman or most daring hunter.

In single fight he had overcome and slain the most terrible wild beast that dwells in the western wilderness. The girl had remained motionless all through the struggle, but upon perceiving that the white was not dead but the victor in the contest, she sprung eagerly to her feet.

Jack understood at once the meaning of this; with all the craft of her race, the maid, upon encountering the bear, had flung herself down upon the earth as if dead, for the king of the forest is no jackal to prey upon others' leavings; he either kills the prey himself or leaves it in disgust.

The white man now had a good, fair view of the face of the Indian girl and was astonished at the resemblance that the face bore to the features of some one he had seen before, and yet for the life of him, he could not recall the person nor the place.

Great was the amazement of the maiden when she looked upon the white man and saw that he was unhurt; she could hardly believe her eyes; yet there was no doubt about the matter; the bear was dead, the pale-face had killed him and yet had not been even scratched in the encounter!

The Indian girl was tall, superbly built, well armed, and as she stood gazing with wondering eyes, Bronze Jack thought he had never met a more magnificent creature. She was even a finer specimen of womankind than the stately sister of the commander of the post of Big Walnut Camp, although, as Jack now mentally compared the two, he thought it would be no easy job to decide which of them was the superior.

"The white chief is unhurt?" she asked.

"I believe so," he replied, and now that she had spoken here was another puzzle: the voice, a rich and melodious one, was not strange to him, although he was sure that he had never met the girl before.

"The white chief has cause to boast that he has overcome the mountain king," she said, pointing to the prostrate form of the great bear.

"He came pretty near making a meal of you."

"I saw him coming down the ravine, and I knew that I could not escape him by flight," she said, "and so I pretended to be dead, for the big bear will not touch the dead. But what is the white man doing in the Apache land? Does he not know that the red chiefs will take his scalp if they find him?"

"You are an Apache?" he questioned, more and more convinced that he had met her before.

"Yes."

"What band?"

"Colorado river Apaches."

"The band of Manga Colorado?"

"Yes; do you know Manga Colorado?"

"Oh, yes; I had the pleasure of meeting him once."

"He is my father."

"Your father!" cried Jack, in amazement.

"Yes; my name is Chito Colorado."

"I have heard of you," and Jack looked upon the girl with double interest.

"You have saved me, perhaps, from the great bear," she said, "for as you came up he was trying his claws upon me, and if the blood had flowed he might have eaten me."

"The brute had taste: he could not have had a more charming morsel!" Jack exclaimed, gallantly.

The girl received the compliment with an ill grace, for she frowned and cast a disdainful look upon him.

"Make me no soft speech; I am no foolish squaw."

"You say that you are Manga Colorado's daughter?" the adventurer observed, a sudden thought occurring to him.

"Yes."

"Was your mother an Indian woman?"

"Why do you ask?" she demanded, imperiously, and with a suspicious glance at his face.

"Because your face is strangely familiar to me, and I thought perhaps that I had either met you before—and I do not remember so doing—or else that you were related to some one that I knew. John Mustang is your brother, I suppose?"

"John Mustang!" exclaimed the girl, an expression of amazement upon her face, which, if it was not genuine, was extremely well assumed.

"Yes: you know him, do you not—the chief of the band known as the Red Gold-Hunters, a half-breed?"

"Why should you think that this man is my brother?" and the girl regarded the adventurer with evident suspicion.

"Because you bear such a great resemblance to him; your face is much more like his than it is like your father's."

"You have saved my life!" returned the girl, abruptly, as if with intent to change the conversation. "Chito Colorado has a grateful heart and she would serve you."

"Much obliged, and the chances are that I shall need aid before I get through with my present expedition," the young man observed, frankly.

"Give it up then, and retrace your steps."

"Oh, no; not until I have accomplished my purpose," was the adventurer's firm response.

"You will surely meet death at my father's hands!"

"I hope not; I trust that you will use your influence to induce your father to permit me to pursue my quest in peace."

"No, no!" cried the girl, hurriedly, "it is not to be thought of for a moment. The bones of all our ancestors would turn in their graves if the Apaches allowed the white men to boldly march through the land of the red-men without a struggle. You must retreat! Be warned before it is too late. I will guide you."

"It is impossible!" he answered, with decision; "as well might you hope to turn the Colorado from its course. Go to your father and bear him word from me that my party is well-armed; all determined men; no plunder to be won by conquering us, but lives can be lost in the attempt."

"Foolish man!" cried the girl, impetuously, "you are already in the snare! You have saved me and by so doing sacrificed yourself! See! the red-men surround you!"

And it was even so, as Jack discovered at a glance around him; plumed heads were peeping up from behind the rocks, dusky faces glaring out from between the pines.

CHAPTER XIV.

CORNERED.

JACK'S weapons were out in an instant, but a second glance told him that resistance was hopeless, for the red-skins were around him in overwhelming numbers.

The adventurer understood at once how this had come about.

The Indians, warned by their sentinels, that

the invading pale-faces had cunningly changed their line of march, had at once sent out strong scouting parties to discover what had become of the bold foe, and one of these parties following the line of the ravine, had thus come upon him.

They had him fairly, and how to escape he knew not, but his first thought was for his companions. If the Apaches kept on down the ravine they most surely would stumble upon the camp. At any risk he must warn Williams and the rest of the danger that threatened.

With a man like Bronze Jack to think was to act, and at once he discharged his revolvers in the air, crying out as he did so:

"Don't shoot! I surrender!"

The girl was not deceived by the movement if the rest were.

"Your friends are near at hand and you hope to warn them!" she cried, quickly, in his ear.

"Oh, no; merely showing your folks that I am not going to give battle," he replied, as carelessly as though he stood not within the very shadow of death.

The red skins came rapidly forward and surrounded the pair. Great was the astonishment of the braves when they looked upon the monstrous carcass of the mountain beast and realized that he had come to his death by the hands of the pale-face in single fight, and right glad were they, one and all, that they had come upon the daring stranger in such overwhelming force as to preclude the idea of a conflict.

Briefly the Indian girl explained to the warriors what had occurred.

"Wah!" exclaimed the old chief, who was in charge of the party, gazing with great admiration at the bold intruder, "the pale-face is a great warrior, but he is in the Apache land, and he must go with us to Manga Colorado, that he may tell what he seeks."

Jack understood the Apache language, although not able to speak it very fluently, but he could make himself understood, and so he at once said that he hadn't under the circumstances, the slightest objection to an interview with the great red chief.

The red-skins, in their dealings with the whites, are not much given to conversation; so the old warrior just nodded, gave some directions in a low tone to his braves, and the party started, first taking the precaution to deprive the prisoner of his weapons.

Jack had expected that he would be sent under guard to the Apache town, while the rest of the party went on in search of his companions, but the old chief had far too high an opinion of the capture which he had been lucky enough to make to risk this.

A man who in single fight could slay the great mountain bear was not to be trusted to the keeping of two or three braves like a common warrior. Besides, he had saved Chito Colorado from a terrible death—the Apache flower, who was like the apple of his eye to the old red brave who lorded it over the Colorado river Apaches, and the wily brave in command of the war-party was quite curious to see how old Manga Colorado would receive the stranger.

In due time the Indians and their prisoner reached the village of Manga.

The Indian town was situated in a pleasant valley on the south side of the Little Colorado river, some twenty miles above the location where the Basaltic Buttes upreared their rocky heads.

The prisoner was placed in a large wigwam, for the camp was buried in slumber, and the old brave in charge of the war-party did not think it wise to disturb the sleep of the chief.

Four good men were assigned to guard the captive, so no chance was there for escape, and Jack smiled grimly as he noticed the precautions taken, but, with true western hardihood, he stretched himself out, making himself as comfortable as possible under the circumstances, and soon was wrapped in slumber's balmy chain.

The Indian camp was wide awake early in the morning, and soon the news spread through it that an important white prisoner had been captured and a gaping crowd of braves, squaws and children surrounded the wigwam which held the prisoner.

The story of the white man's daring fight with the great mountain bear and his victory over the brute had been told, and the simple savages wondered what manner of man was this who dared to encounter such peril.

A substantial breakfast was provided for the prisoner, and he was informed that after he had dispatched it, he would be conducted before the old Apache chief.

The adventurer expressed himself as being perfectly satisfied at this, and falling upon the coarse viands provided, dispatched them with great gusto.

The Indians watched him with amazement; knowing that he was doomed to certain death and that it was impossible he could be ignorant of the fact, they wondered at his indifferent behavior.

The Apaches had prepared themselves to astonish and awe the bold heart of their daring captive.

Right in the center of the village stood the stout stake around which the Indian games and dances usually took place, and which also served

as the place of torture for the unfortunate foe, hapless enough to fall alive into the hands of the red tigers.

In front of this stake, and some twenty feet distant from it, a rude throne, covered with buffalo, bear and wolf skins, had been constructed for Manga Colorado's special benefit, and on it the old chief sat when the prisoner was brought forth. Around this throne stood the painted Apache warriors, the very flower of all the fighting-men of the great nation; behind the circle of warriors, at a respectful distance, were grouped the old men of the tribe, the squaws and the children, each and all anxious to gaze upon the valiant white brave who had, single-handed, won the right to wear the necklace of bear's claws and teeth—an ornament that precious few dusky braves can boast of.

Bronze Jack came sauntering along in the midst of his guards, with his light and springy step. He was too old a gambler—had too often risked his all upon the turn of a card or the uncertain hazard of the die, when to lose meant almost certain death—to feel at all alarmed at his present position.

The Indians conducted him to the gayly-painted stake, placed his back against it, and then the chief of the party, in grandiloquent tones, bade him look upon the great head of the Colorado Apaches, Manga Colorado.

The old chief fixed his dark and glittering eyes upon the prisoner, and a smile of exultation lighted up his dusky features. He recognized him at once. This pale-face was the companion of the old mountain-man, Big Bill Williams, who had dared to put such a public affront upon him in the open streets of the white men's village, and the cheek of the brawny warrior tingled even now, as though once again it felt the imprint of the old scout's muscular fingers.

Vengeance was in his grasp, though much sooner than he expected or hoped.

Jack nodded to the chief in the most careless manner.

Manga Colorado noted this and frowned; the bearing of the man pleased him not. He expected to see a pale face, quivering lips and trembling limbs, not the reckless bravado of a conquering hero.

"Do you know where you are, white man?" the old chief demanded, speaking the English both plainly and fluently.

"In an Apache village, I presume," Bronze Jack answered.

"In the village of Manga Colorado, the great war-chief of the Apache nation!" cried the red man, swelling out with conscious pride.

"Oh, yes, I recognized you," the prisoner rejoined. "I had the pleasure of seeing you in Big Walnut Camp, if you remember, the night when you had the little difficulty with my partner, Big Bill Williams, the old scout."

This bold reminder of the affray irritated the old chief fearfully.

He rose to his feet and swore roundly.

"Caramba!" he hissed through his clenched teeth; "if I had that pale-face here now I would drink his blood!"

"Oh, he knows a trick worth two of that," the white replied; "he's going to skin you alive and take your hide to tan for moccasins the very first time he gets his clutches on you!"

Was this madness or the desperation of despair that impelled the captive thus to bandy words with the Apache chief?

CHAPTER XV.

MANGA EXPLAINS.

THE chief grew fairly purple in the face with rage; he clutched at the long, keen-edged scalping-knife which was thrust, sheathless, through the belt of untanned leather which girded in his brawny waist, and took a step or two toward the prisoner; for a moment all the lookers-on held their breath, for they fully expected to see the old chief step forward and plunge his knife in the breast of the daring speaker.

Two steps Manga Colorado took and then halted—and the prisoner, bold, reckless, audacious man, the ruling instinct strong in this hour of peril, quietly muttered to himself:

"I'll take five to one that he don't knife me!"

And the foolhardy sport would have won, too, for, after a moment's hesitation, the old chief subdued his anger. He had good reasons for not rushing, by a single hasty blow, to take the life of the captive. He was not the only white man in the Apache land; he had companions, and in regard to those companions he, Manga Colorado, had use for the prisoner. Besides, too, a single blow producing instant death was mercy indeed compared to the moments of torture which it was the custom of the red-men to inflict upon their prisoners.

Oh no! not even to satisfy the anger which swelled in his heart, would he rob his people of the pleasure of looking upon the sufferings of one of their hated foes.

With a deep, guttural exclamation the old chief shoved the knife back in his belt, and turning, strode back to his throne.

"Many a slip between the cup and the lip, and a miss is as good as a mile!" laughed the prisoner.

"Let the white man look well to his tongue

or it may cost him his life!" the Apache exclaimed.

"Chief, I never yet learned how to put a bridle on my tongue, and it is rather late in the day for me to try to do it," answered Jack, not in the least abashed.

The old warrior scowled; to be thus bearded in the presence of all his tribe was not pleasant, but he restrained his fierce passion for the moment.

"What brings the white man to Apache land?" he demanded, imperiously.

"Gold!" answered Jack.

Again the chief frowned, and this time the look appeared on every dusky face around.

The white man's thirst for gold had despoiled the Indian of his land, and the blunt avowal that it was the shining metal that had lured him into the wilderness made the hearts of all the listeners swell with rage.

"The pale-face's hunt for gold will cost him his life!" cried the old chief.

"Maybe so! Nothing venture, nothing won," observed Jack, placidly.

"There is no gold in Apache land! It is all a lie that says that there is!" continued the warrior, vehemently.

"Perhaps so, but I've heard differently."

"And if there was gold here—if it was as common as the pebbles in the river—in lumps as big as the rocks that fill the canyons of the Colorado, it would not profit the white men, for the Apache chiefs with fire and steel stand in the way, and while the red-men live the white men shall not come to dig and dwell in the land that the Great Spirit gave to the red warriors!"

To which outburst of the old chief a strong guttural assent escaped the mouths of the listeners.

"The white man did not come alone to Apache land," the old warrior continued "where are his companions?"

"I cannot tell, chief, but I think it is extremely probable that some of your braves will be able to discover them before long."

Considering that the Apaches had six different trailing parties the supposition of the captive was not unreasonable.

"Oh, we shall find them!" the chief exclaimed, abruptly, "and when we do find them my white brother must go to them and bear a message from the men of Apache land."

"Certainly, with a great deal of pleasure," Jack replied, and for the first time he began to think that he saw a way to get out of his rather unpleasant position.

"He will tell his brothers that to the Apache chiefs the Apache land belongs—that it is their country and that no white men are allowed to set foot in it."

"Yes; but, chief!" cried Jack, abruptly, "I don't exactly understand this; I thought there was a treaty of peace between the white settlers and the Apaches?"

The chief nodded, gravely. Just as if he cared anything for a treaty, he, the red butcher, who never was known to keep his word to either friend or foe when he could make anything by breaking it!

"If there is a treaty of peace, then—if no war exists between the Apache nation and the white settlers, why have not my party the right to march freely, without molestation, through this territory, and why did your warriors make me their prisoner? and, although I care not to boast of my deeds, I had just saved one of your people from a terrible death; your daughter, Chito, I believe."

"The chief is a mighty warrior," responded old Colorado, with a gracious nod; "if he is the foe of the Apache nation he will work the red-men much harm, therefore must Manga Colorado stifle in his bosom the feelings of a father and remember only that he is the chief of the Colorado river Apaches. As a father, Manga Colorado thanks you for saving the life of his child; as the chief of his people he must forget that he ever had a daughter, and destroy you as a dangerous enemy to his race."

This was a very neat way of putting it, and, as Bronze Jack saw at once, an extremely simple scheme to solve the riddle; as a father he thanked, but as a ruler he struck!

"But the treaty—the treaty of peace which in Big Walnut Camp saved you from the vengeance of Bill Williams!" the adventurer exclaimed.

"The Apache village, by the Little Colorado, is not the mud-camp of the gold-diggers on the Clear Fork of the Rio San Francisco," the old chief replied, with a great deal of dignity.

"You mean that circumstances alter cases!" suggested Jack, who comprehended at once what the old rascal was driving at, and he saw how justly he had been rated by Big Bill Williams, when he had declared that there was neither truth, honesty, nor justice in the breast of the savage.

The chief gravely inclined his head; it was an ugly case to explain, anyway, and he rightly considered that the fewer words said the better.

"The treaty is good when Manga Colorado is threatened in the white village, but not good when the Apaches surround a pale-face in the Apache land."

"My brother speaks with a straight tongue!" the old chief confessed, with a grin.

"I am to go to my men—good! What am I to say to them?" The adventurer was bent upon making the wily savage show his hand.

"Tell them that they have all forfeited their lives by coming into my country, but that I do not desire their blood, although to take their scalps, surrounded as they will be by my warriors, were as easy as the turning over of my hand."

The prisoner made a wry face.

"Big Bill Williams and the rest, who are like him, may have a different opinion on that point," he observed. "For every scalp of that party that you win, count a dozen of your best warriors lost!"

In this sort of a "bluff" game Jack was fully as good as his master.

The savages scowled, and the old chief came very near flying into a rage again, but by a great effort he restrained himself.

"Talk is talk, and words are empty as the wind!" he cried, contemptuously. "The Apaches can afford to lose a hundred braves to every scalp and never miss them. But you will go to these madmen who dare the Indians' rage; you will say to them that Manga Colorado gives them their lives, but they must lay down their arms, give up their ammunition, their tools, their horses, everything that they have, and then, in pity for their defenseless condition, the Apache chief with his warriors will escort them within sight of the smoke of the white men's fires, and dismiss them unharmed, upon their solemn promise never to come again into the Apache land. Is it good, my brother?" And the old villain looked anxiously into the face of the white man as he put the question.

Despite the peril of his position, Bronze Jack burst into a loud and scornful laugh, much to the amazement of the red-skins.

"Is it good?" he repeated; "oh yes! very good for you, for, the moment they lay down their arms, you can butcher them in cold blood without risk!"

CHAPTER XVI.

JOHN MUSTANG APPEARS.

THE adventurer had guessed the idea of the Indian exactly; Manga Colorado had reasoned shrewdly in regard to the matter. Big Bill Williams was one of the party; the Apaches knew the old mountain-man well enough. They had had a taste of his quality on more than one occasion, and they felt sure that if the rest of the adventurers were modeled after him, the scalps of the white men would not be easily taken.

A deep and subtle reasoner is the red-man, untutored savage though he may be. No braver men than the red Apache warriors walk the earth; on many occasions, that the border-land still remembers with horror, they had amply proven that they held life as lightly as the turbaned fighting-men of the East, whose belief it is that death is but a happy passport to the glories of another land, far surpassing this dull, cold earth in every respect, and that the man who in battle falls is far more lucky than the soldier who escapes the carnage. But it is the creed of the red-men never to risk life wantonly and without an object; revenge sometimes will answer, but the painted warriors always fight better when there is a prospect of rich spoils to be gained; a few horses, a wagon-load or two of plunder, will excite the feather-garnished chiefs to wondrous deeds of valor; but if the attack is frustrated, and the destined victims prove to be strong enough to defend their property and their scalps, the red-men hold it no sin to take to their heels and run like so many rabbits, frightened by the dog's approach.

And on this present occasion the amount of plunder possessed by the invading white-skins the Indians did not deem sufficient to warrant a bloody fight, if it could be won without, although at any cost, they were determined in the end to either kill the daring adventurers or drive them from the Apache land; but if, by trick and device—by fair words and false oaths—the whites could be induced to surrender, and so fall an easy prey, why so much the better, and to the minds of the Apaches it was a perfectly fair trick.

Great was the wrath, then, of old Manga and his braves, when the captive white man penetrated the scheme so quickly; but the chief attempted to brazen it out.

"Does not my brother believe the word of the great king of Apache-land?" the old warrior demanded, grandiloquently. "Is not the faith of Manga Colorado good? Will not the white men believe that when he says if the white men lay down their arms and give up their goods they shall go free, he speaks with a straight tongue?"

"No, sir!" responded Bronze Jack, decidedly; "the white man would *not* believe you, although you swore by everything that the men of the Apache land hold sacred. They think that you are a fraud, Manga, and, between you and me, I think that they are about right in holding that opinion. If you want scalps, you must win them in open fight. You may be able to trick

the Government and the soldiers, but not the old mountain-men who know you from A to Izzard!"

The wrath of the old chief flamed forth at this bold speech, and he shook his brawny fist furiously at the prisoner.

"I have you and your scalp, at any rate!" he cried. "Prepare to sing your death-song, dog of a white-skin, for soon your blood will flow; the squaws and children shall hew you piecemeal, and when in the agonies of death's torments you cry for mercy, the Apaches will laugh in your face and spit upon you!"

Not a whit terrified was the captive at the rage of the old chief, but he faced him, undauntedly.

"You old red butcher!" he exclaimed; "cowardly Apache dog—squaw-warrior, you are only fit to rule over women and children! If I were only free, with my bare hands would I be willing to encounter you or the best warrior of your cowardly tribe, race of curs that you are!"

This bold defiance so provoked the rage of the Indians that one of the young braves could not restrain himself, and he sprung forward with a yell with the intention of striking the bold white man in the face, but although Jack's hands were bound, his feet were not, and as the savage came near in his blind rush he saluted him with a powerful kick that doubled the red-skin up in the most summary manner, and losing his balance the brave tumbled to the ground in the most undignified manner, rolling around, howling with pain.

This bold deed produced an instant uproar; knives flashed in the air, firearms were leveled, and the great Indian war-clubs upraised; in fact, the life of the prisoner would not have been worth a moment's purchase had not the old chief interfered to protect the captive; not from any sentiment of humanity, though, but because he believed that he had penetrated the prisoner's design and took a malicious pleasure in baffling it. He believed that the prisoner wished, by provoking the anger of the Apaches, to escape from the fearful torture to which he was doomed.

"Hold off your hands!" the old warrior yelled, at the top of his sonorous voice. "A single blow is not enough to avenge the insults which this bold white man has put upon the great Apache nation this day. Let us not by a single stroke deprive ourselves of the pleasure of seeing him die by inches! Bind him to the stake!"

This time Bronze Jack resisted to the extent of his powers, kicking right and left with all the quickness and vigor of an enraged mule, but finally the task was accomplished.

"Now let the squaws and children prepare," commanded Manga. "Make the white man howl with pain so that we may laugh with glee. Let the sport begin!"

But that sport the Apache village was not destined to see that day, for, just as the rabble advanced, delighted at the chance, into the little open square rode a solitary horseman—a man below the medium size, his dress a strange mixture of Indian, Mexican and plainsman; he sat his horse with that ease and grace which can only come from being born as it were to the saddle.

He spurred the mustang which he bestrode at once into the open space which intervened between the rabble and the torture-stake and so stayed their advance.

"I seek a word with Manga Colorado!" he cried, reining in his horse in front of the prisoner.

The new-comer was John Mustang, the chief of the Red Gold-Hunters.

The old Apache chief scowled; it was plain that he did not like the interference of the young man.

"Manga Colorado is here; what is wanted?" he demanded.

"The life of the prisoner!" replied the other, boldly; "it belongs to me."

There was a general murmur of disapproval at this; not without a struggle would the Apaches see their prey torn from them.

"It may not be! This pale-face is the captive of the Apache nation!" the old chief declared.

"And to whom are you indebted for the information which led to his capture?" the young Gold-Hunter cried. "Who gave you warning when they left the white settlement? Who tracked them into the hills and kindled the signal-smoke that you might have warning?"

"The Apaches do not complain," the old warrior returned; "the young chief acted like a true friend, but he must not hope to step in between the red-men and their prey; this pale-face is doomed, and not for one of his little fingers would Manga Colorado allow him to escape."

"This man's life belongs to me!" persisted the other; "if it had not been for me he never would have fallen into your power. He is my foe, and no other hand but mine must take his life!"

The Apaches rather brightened up at this, for, in truth, they cared very little how the captive died so long as he was put out of the way in their presence.

"Let my brother explain what he wants,"

said Manga, evidently a little puzzled to guess the purpose of the youth. "The Apache chief is not unreasonable."

"The man is my foe, and by my hand alone must he die," the young man repeated.

The old chief nodded assent.

"It was my will that he should suffer the torture so that the Apaches might grow fat upon his suffering; but if my brother claims him, Manga Colorado will not dispute the claim, although the nation will be much disappointed. My brother shall deal the death-blow with his own hand."

The lip of John Mustang curled in contempt.

"I scorn to strike an unarmed man!" he exclaimed. "Give him back his weapons, furnish him with a horse, and I will meet him in single fight; if he conquers me then he can go free!"

The faces of the throng lighted up; this seemed to promise a rare show, but the old chief pondered over the matter for a moment. The proposition was not agreeable to him, and he had no sympathy at all with the chivalric spirit of the young Gold-Hunter which had prompted the offer, but he was pretty well acquainted with the individual who called himself by so odd a title, and he, better perhaps than any one else in the world, knew how hard it was to turn that party from his way.

And the Red Gold-Hunter had a hold, too, on the old chief—a hold which he could not deny; and thus, despite his objections, he was forced to consent.

"My brother has always kept faith with the Apaches, and they now can do no less with him," Manga said, gracefully, making a virtue of necessity. "It shall be as my brother wishes. Bring the white man's arms and a horse!"

"And you, sir?" demanded the young man, turning to the captive, "are you willing to accept the conditions?"

"Stranger, I'm agreeable to accept almost anything now," Jack replied, a quiet smile of confidence upon his bronzed features.

CHAPTER XVII.

NECK OR NOTHING.

THE Apache chief did not feel the confidence in regard to the result of the affair which inspired the breast of the young Gold-Hunter.

A wily and sagacious man was Manga—really a great man, considering the limited opportunities which he had enjoyed, and had he had in early life the advantages of civilization—had he been born to rule over a European kingdom, there is no doubt whatever that he would have written his name high up on the scroll of fame. As it is, wild, ignorant, barbarian ruler of a host of untutored savages, in the pages of history he lives as one of the greatest Indians of them all.

The white captive had made a deep impression upon him. More quiet than the Big Bill Williams class of men, a self-reliant fellow, with no bravado at all about him, he had impressed the chief as being the most dangerous white man whom he had ever seen.

John Mustang was no stranger to him. As well as any man living the old chief knew how skillful the young Gold-Hunter was with all kinds of weapons—how reckless of life, how brave in will; still, he feared for the result of the coming contest, yet with that strange belief in fatality so common alike to the red American Indians and the turbaned warriors of the desert, although he felt sure that John Mustang would not prove the conqueror in the coming fight, yet he took no steps to prevent the contest.

If the Red Gold-Hunter was to fail, it was his "kismet," and could not be helped; but, in regard to the white-skin going free according to the agreement, if he succeeded in obtaining the victory in the approaching struggle, the old chief had his ideas about that.

If the adventurer fell by the hand of the Red Gold-Hunter, well and good; but if the plainsman, on the contrary, succeeded in killing his antagonist, then Manga was determined that the Apaches should finish him at once upon the spot, despite the terms of the fight; and therefore, while the preparations were going forward for the duel, the old chief secretly instructed a chosen band of picked fighting-men in regard to what they should do at a certain signal.

With skill and care the Apache chief chose a spot for the fight, well suited to his purpose.

A short half-mile down the stream from the spot where the Apache village was located the bluffs of the river rose high on either side.

It was a good hundred feet, sheer down, straight as the wall of a tower by skillful masons laid, from the edge of the bluff to the surface of the Little Colorado below.

On the surface of the bluff was an open plateau of table-land, as level as a race-track, about a mile across.

This was the spot that the Apache chief selected.

He arranged his warriors, all armed—his old men, squaws and children, all armed, too—in a

semicircle, on the edge of the plateau stretching from the river to the river again.

Thus the scene of the fight was all hemmed in by a line of savages, the river side alone excepted, but the deep gulf which there existed was an impassable barrier except to a bird of the air or some desperate wild beast.

At one end of the plateau the Red Gold-Hunter stood by his horse; at the other the captive was placed.

The conditions of the fight were simple enough. Each combatant was armed with rifle, revolver and knife; at a given signal, by Manga Colorado displayed, they were to vault into the saddle, or advance on foot at their own option and open battle.

With almost breathless eagerness, their lips drawn apart, displaying their white, fang-like teeth, the Apaches looked upon the scene, anxious for the strife to begin.

The combatants, cool and self-possessed, waited for the word.

The old chief was apparently the most nervous man upon the field. His face was dark, the features rigid, and he hesitated to give the signal for the fight to begin. If he had been sure that the contest would have ended with the death of the intruding white man how gladly would he have signaled for the scene of blood to begin! but in his heart of hearts he feared for the life of the Red Gold-Hunter.

All eyes were upon him, though; it was too late to attempt to alter affairs now; and so, at last he gave the signal.

Prompt to the word John Mustang vaulted into the saddle. Prompt to the word the adventurer leveled his rifle across the back of his mustang and in the most easy and careless manner possible fired, apparently never troubling himself in the least to take aim.

The shot was a deadly one, though, for the ball entering through the breast of the mustang cut his heart in twain, and with a wild pitch forward the beast went down, stone dead.

John Mustang was taken utterly by surprise, and it was only by the aid of the dexterity that comes like a second nature to the rider used from boyhood to the back of a horse, that he was enabled to avoid being pitched headlong over his horse's head, so unexpected was the downfall of the beast.

A loud "Wah!" went round the circle as they beheld the marvelous feat. The Apaches had seen some pretty things in the way of marksmanship in their time, but this was the most marvelous shot they had ever witnessed.

Accident! It must be accident, the braves muttered among themselves; it was quite clear to them that such wonderful skill was not within the compass of a human's powers.

But the old chief did not agree with the rest. His face was sterner and darker than ever, and his eyes had a gloomy look. He nothing doubted now, after this display, that he should soon look upon the death-agonies of the Red Gold-Hunter.

And the old chief clutched his rifle still firmer, resolved to offer up the rash intruder an instant sacrifice the moment the deed was done.

For a moment the young man stood like one stunned and glared upon his foe—confused by the shot.

And then Jack cast his useless rifle aside, drew his revolver, and stepping out in front of his mustang seemed in bravado to invite the fire of his foe, disdaining the shelter of the horse.

Nettled by the bold defiance, John Mustang brought his rifle to the shoulder and took careful aim at the exposed body of his foe, but the adventurer never flinched in the least.

The lookers-on, like men spellbound, fairly held their breath until the suspense was broken by the sharp crack of the rifle, and simultaneously with the report the pale-face dropped to the ground, not hurt, for the bullet had no time to reach him unless it traveled with the speed of the lightning, and man, with all his ingenuity, has not been able to invent a gunpowder effective enough for that, yet.

It was a cunning device of Jack to save himself, and well was it for him, too, that he had tried the dodge, for the rifle-bullet of the half-breed most surely would have ended his career there and then if he had not practiced the trick, so true was the aim of the other.

Half the spectators at first believed that the white-skin was slain, but they were soon convinced of the contrary, for, as nimbly as a dancing-master, Jack rose to his feet, leaped upon the back of the mustang, and, pistol in hand, charged down full upon the half-breed.

John Mustang could do nothing but stand his ground and try to disable his foe as he came closing in.

Straight as an arrow Jack advanced, and when he got within range the half-breed fired.

An excellent shot was John Mustang, and his aim was well taken, but on this occasion he seemed to have a demon for a foe rather than a man, for at the very instant that he fired, the adventurer pulled his horse up sharply, the animal reared, and the ball which otherwise most surely would have settled Bronze Jack, so far as this world is concerned, tore a ragged flesh-wound in the mustang's shoulder.

It was the Red Gold-Hunter's last chance, for,

on the instant, before the fore feet of the pony touched the ground again, the white fired, again a careless snap-shot, apparently at random.

With a groan the Red Gold-Hunter threw up his hand and then fell forward on his face.

The fight was done; Bronze Jack had won an easy victory.

And then, in rage and despair, the old chief gave the signal.

"Kill him! Down with the pale-face!"

With the resistless force of the wild mountain torrent the red-skins rushed forward, brandishing their weapons.

Death stared Jack in the face, but he was equal to the situation.

With a wild shout he forced his pony to the edge of the bluff, and the affrighted animal, prodded by the knife of the plainsman, leaped into the gulf.

It was a fearfully daring deed!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PURSUIT.

THE howl that went up on the air from the throats of the Apaches was a terrible one, for never were men in this world more astonished.

They thought that they held the victorious plainsman securely in their power, and surely none but a desperate madman, impatient of life and seeking for death, would have dared the fearful leap over the edge of the bluff into the stream below, for, to the minds of the savages, the chances seemed a hundred to one that no mortal could make the leap and ever live to tell of it.

With loud outcries they rushed to the edge of the bluff and looked down into the stream below.

The mustang, evidently disabled, and terribly wounded by the fall, was struggling in the current, but the rider was nowhere to be seen.

Either he had perished outright, killed by the shock of the fall, or else had escaped unhurt and had taken advantage of some projecting rock or clump of bushes to find concealment.

Manga Colorado was bursting with rage; he had been completely outwitted; he thought he had arranged the trap so carefully that, in event of the white man proving to be the victor, he and his red braves could easily finish him, for he had not calculated that in any case a mortal would dare the leap over the bluff.

The chief was prompt in action; the pale-face was either living or dead. In the former case, he might be recaptured by a prompt and active pursuit; in the latter, his body at least would be found, and so Manga at once directed that a search should be begun.

It was about a half a mile round from the open plateau to the bed of the stream, either up or down the river, and in order to make assurance doubly sure, the chief dispatched two parties, one up and the other down the stream.

He did not go in person, but remained to pay the last sad rites to the remains of the young Gold-Hunter, who had fallen such an easy victim to the skill of the plainsman.

It was with a heavy heart that Manga Colorado approached the spot where the figure of the half-breed lay extended on the ground.

The face of the old ruffianly, brutal chief was deep in sadness; any one who had known the old red butcher in the hour of his triumph, when, gloating with victory, he swore destruction to all his foes, whether they were red or white, would never have recognized the man as the same.

Indeed, one would have almost fancied that a tear stood in the fierce, dark eye, as he glanced down upon the prostrate form.

"This white man is a devil!" he murmured. "Why did youthful rashness tempt fate by endeavoring to cope with him, and, blind fool that I am! why did I allow this bright star to rush madly on to death?"

"It was his fate," murmured the old medicine-man of the tribe, in the ear of the chief, for he had silently followed in the footsteps of the other. "When the Great Spirit calls, mortals cannot resist the summons."

"Take him up and bear him to my wigwam," Manga commanded. "This is a black day for the Apache nation, and our women must weep and wail, for a warrior's heart is stilled at last."

The braves advanced slowly to obey the command, but as they stooped and laid their hands upon the prostrate form, amazement appeared upon their faces.

The body was fully warm; the heart beat; life was not yet extinct!

With that keen instinct, peculiar to the relation which he bore to the discomfited half-breed, the old chief guessed the truth at once.

"He is only stunned!" he cried in joy. "Glorious be to the Great Spirit that he is not dead! He will live!"

And even with the words, as though their import had reached the ears of the stricken one, he moved, opened his eyes, gazed vacantly around him for a few moments and rose to a sitting posture, carrying his hands to his head as though he felt pain there. He was still dazed by the shock which he had received.

"Where are you wounded?" questioned the

chief, whose keen eyes could not detect trace of blood.

"The ball struck me in the head," the half-breed answered, slowly; and the examination developed a most wonderful thing. The pistol-ball of the adventurer had just creased the head, and a faint red line betrayed the course which it had taken; otherwise the youth was unharmed.

The red-men looked at each other in wonder. Was this accident, or another marvelous shot—the course of the ball directed with a skillful aim?

But this idea was at once dismissed, for what reason had the plainsman to wish to spare the life of the man who sought to take his? None in the world, of course, and therefore it was evident that the peculiar shot was only accidental.

The first question the Red Gold-Hunter asked when he got upon his feet was in regard to his antagonist, and great was his astonishment when informed of the daring leap.

And he was annoyed also, that the Apache chief had not kept his word with the white man, and openly remonstrated.

"He was to have free passage if he conquered me!" he exclaimed. "Why was he driven to leap?"

"Wah! Why should the Apaches keep faith with a dog of a white man?" the old chief exclaimed, contemptuously.

"The red-man's word should be his bond!"

"With the red-men, yes; with the white dogs, no!" And to do Manga Colorado full justice it must be said from the commencement of the end of his career he lived up to his motto religiously.

The young man saw that it was useless to bandy words with the old chief upon this point so he held his peace.

And now that his mind was freed from anxiety, the Apache leader prepared to go in search of the companions of the bold white man, first waiting, however, until the two parties whom he had dispatched in search of the fugitive had returned.

The search had been a fruitless one; no trace of the adventurer could they discover, either alive or dead.

The warriors had thoroughly explored the valley of the stream. The escape seemed almost unaccountable; and yet, when Manga came to consider the matter he saw that, as the fugitive had a straight road right down the stream while from the nature of the ground the pursuing parties had been obliged to make a considerable *détour*, it was not impossible that he had succeeded in escaping from the valley before the Indian scouting parties struck the stream; and then, too, on the opposite bank, a short distance down, the high bluffs fell away and a broken, irregular country succeeded, affording ample concealment. If the plainsman had reached this wooded region concealment was easy.

Reluctantly then the old chief abandoned the pursuit and began to prepare for the expedition against the rest of the white band.

And when all preparations were made, and the party was about to start, the young Gold-Hunter, who seemed strangely moody and dejected since his recovery from the shock which he had received, announced that he should not go with the expedition but would go off by himself.

"You think that you can discover where the white devil lurks?" the old chief questioned.

"Perhaps," responded the other, evasively.

"Do not seek him!" exclaimed Manga, laying his brawny red paw upon the shoulder of the other. "That man is bad medicine! do not seek him unless you have a dozen good stout warriors at your back."

"I do not fear," declared the Red Gold-Hunter, sullenly.

"Be warned by my words," continued the old chief. "I have lived many years in this world. There are some men who are fatal to all that cross their path; it is no use; step out of their way."

"And yet, you go to hunt down this man and his companions?"

"And how many warriors do I take with me?" asked the Apache chief, pointing to the swarm ready for the war-path. "We are twenty—forty to one. If they are wise they will surrender when they see our force."

The young man shook his head.

"Such men as Big Bill Williams do not surrender," warned the young half breed.

"It is good; we will kill them all!" the chief replied, furiously.

"They will die hard."

"So does the big bear, but the hunters make it their prey, nevertheless."

Selecting a horse the Red Gold-Hunter mounted and rode away, while the old chief gazed after him with anxious eyes.

"His head is not right," he muttered; "the shock was too much for him. If he goes to seek the pale-face he goes to his death, for the second time the bullet will not graze his skull. No man has such luck twice in the world!" and after this sage reflection the old butcher put himself at the head of his warriors and started forth upon the war-path which was intended to rid the Apache land of its white invaders.

CHAPTER XIX.

A STRONG POSITION.

AND while these stirring events had been taking place Big Bill Williams and the rest had not been idle.

The report of the shots fired by Bronze Jack upon encountering the bear had come plainly to their ears, for in the mountain region the air is so pure that sounds travel clear and far, particularly by night.

The first shots put the adventurers on the alert, for they knew well that Jack would not use firearms except to save himself from deadly peril, and then, when the second one came to their ears, discharged by Jack, as the reader probably will remember, when the Apaches made their appearance in force, they at once concluded that there was danger ahead, and that, as the old scout sagely remarked:

"Boys, it's 'bout time that we wasn't hyer."

None were surprised by this sudden stampeding, for they had been expecting to run afoul of the red-skins ever since they understood that the smoke signals had given warning of their approach.

Nor was the old scout a blind leader of the blind in this emergency. He knew every foot of the trackless wilderness as well as any red-skin of them all, for he had hunted and trapped over nearly every square mile of it from the junction of the Big and Little Colorados to the Gila river and its affluents on the south.

And the old scout, too, upon calmly surveying the situation saw the folly of attempting to dodge the Apaches.

"No, sir-eel!" he exclaimed; "that dodge won't work! They air arter us as thick as fleas in the wool of a Frenchman's dorg; and I don't keer how snug we hide they air bound to smell us out in time. It's fight now, you bet; and red-hot, too, and since we've got to fight 'em, why, we want to get a good place to do that air thing up squar'."

And old Bill Williams was equal to the situation; he knew a spot where he and his companions could intrench themselves, and as long as their ammunition and provisions held out could bid defiance to the entire Apache nation.

Only a short distance from the Basaltic Buttes the Little Colorado made an abrupt bend, curving around so as to form a regular horse-shoe, inclosing about a hundred acres of ground—the distance across the points of the shoe being not over three or four hundred yards.

The interior of this space was broken, irregular ground, with clumps of bushes here and there, but along the space where a line could be drawn from river to river it was all clear and open like the plain beyond.

A better spot to serve their turn the hand of man could not have devised.

Around the horse-shoe the stream swept broad and deep—too deep to be fordable, and the banks on the other side were low and almost destitute of vegetation, offering no places of concealment.

So to the horse-shoe bend the old scout at once conducted his party, and he waxed jolly as he explained to them the advantages of the location.

"We'll have a moon all this week, too, so that the red niggers won't be able to sneak onto us in the dark. We've got victuals enough to last us some time, and the river is full of fish, so we can't be starved out easy; and thar, over yonder, is the old ruined Yuma town whar we calculate the gold is!"

And, sure enough, the ruins of the ancient city could be easily distinguished as they loomed up black against the sky.

After they had carefully examined their quarters and made all needful preparation for defense and guard, the adventurers betook themselves to slumber, feeling sure that they would not be troubled by the red foe before morning.

And in this they calculated shrewdly, for, as the reader knows, the red-men were so occupied by the duel between the Red Gold-Hunter and the white adventurer and the stirring events which succeeded that affair, that they had no time for aught else.

But when Manga Colorado, at the head of the warriors, took the war-path, it was not long before the keen trackers who preceded the war-party, got upon the trail of the whites, particularly as the latter had not taken the least pains to disguise it.

And so it came about that by high noon the Apaches appeared in force by the horse-shoe bend off the Little Colorado.

The whites were skillfully concealed in the bushes so that no sign of their presence could be discovered; but the Apache chief nothing doubted that the men he sought were concealed within the bend, and although he saw that the position was a strong one, yet he could hardly bring himself to believe that the strangers would be able to offer successful resistance, so terribly were they outnumbered.

True he knew that the whites probably would make a desperate resistance, but he trusted to a grand rush to overwhelm and crush them.

But, true to his usual policy, he wanted a "talk" first, trusting by fair words and smooth promises to induce the whites to lay down their

arms so that his red braves could butcher them without danger.

So Manga sent a warrior forward, with a flag of truce.

With great parade the brave laid down his arms upon the plain, took his flag of truce and advanced toward the timber wherein the whites were presumed to be concealed.

Williams—who at times could be fully as savage as any red devil of them all—at first proposed to shoot down the bearer of the flag without mercy, as, he averred, the Apaches had done many a time, which was only too true; but the rest overruled him.

"No, no, we ain't heathen!" Colonel Bill observed. "Let's gi'n 'em a fair Christian fight for their money. If they do act like dogs, it's because they don't know any better, but we do."

"Oh, yes, let 'em spit out what they've got to say; besides, we may be able to get some information in regard to Bronze Jack," Black Jim Placer suggested.

"We will play fair!" Spanish Pete exclaimed. "Let 'em talk first and then we'll give them all the fight they want."

It seems really incredible, but here were four men surrounded by at least a hundred Apaches, and yet they felt perfectly sure that they would be able to give the reds a successful fight, but they were old mountain or plainsmen, all of them, and well used to battling with the savage foe.

Williams was appointed spokesman; so, rising from the shelter of the bush where he had lain concealed, much to the surprise of the savage envoy, who had no idea that the whites were so near, he accosted the brave:

"Howdy, red buck!" he cried out. "What you want, eh?"

The sudden appearance of Williams's stalwart figure, armed to the teeth and a cocked revolver in his hand, rather disconcerted the savage.

"Come, spit it out, ye 'tarnal red heathen!" Williams continued; "spit it out or I'll drill a hole right through you, you dirty son of a copper-colored jack rabbit!"

The eyes of the Indian flashed fire and he plainly showed his rage at the contemptuous appellation of the old scout.

"I come from Manga Colorado," he responded. "The chief of the Apache land is angry when he sees his country invaded by the white men. He has sent me to tell you to go back to your own homes or the red-men will take your scalps."

"Oh, we kin go, kin we, scot free?"

"Yes, if you lay down your arms and surrender the Apaches will conduct you to your own lodges."

"Oh, you p'ison-cat!" yelled Williams, in contempt, "and do you think that any white men with two grains of sense would lay down their arms at Manga Colorado's request and trust to *his* word? Why, I wouldn't trust a bob-tailed cur with the old Apache thief! Go back to your chief and tell him the white men are not children; we know Manga Colorado of old, and we wouldn't trust him as far as we could spit."

"Your chief has surrendered."

"Bring him out and let us see him!" It was quite plain that the old scout doubted the statement of the red-man.

"It is impossible," the Indian rejoined. "Your chief was surrounded by our warriors; we could have taken his scalp a hundred times, but we made him the same offer that Manga Colorado has proffered to you."

"And he accepted, of course!" the old ranger suggested. "He laid down his arms, eat humble pie and swore by the ever-living sun that he would never set foot in the Apache land, ag'in, hey?"

"Yes; your chief did so agree," the savage replied, falling into the trap, impressed with the belief that he had succeeded in fooling the white-skin.

"You air a copper-colored, bandy-legged liar!" Big Bill Williams shouted, "and if you arn't out of hyer inside of two minutes I'll make a hole in your skin big enough to drive a four-hoss mule-team through—d'y'e hear?"

The Apache glared in rage, but from Williams's face he understood that the old scout was in deadly earnest.

"If the white men wish war they can have it, red-hot!" the brave exclaimed, with savage dignity, and then he turned upon his heel and strode away.

CHAPTER XX.

WAR TO THE KNIFE.

THE envoy returned to his chief and reported the result of his conference with the invaders, and Manga Colorado then well understood that if he hungered after their scalps he must go and take them!

And this was no easy job, although his forces did outnumber the whites twenty to one. Well posted and protected by the timber, the Apache chief did not doubt that such old mountain-men as these whom he had to encounter would sell their lives dearly; so a council of war was called and the expression was unanimous that a

bold rush was the last expedient to be tried; but when the red-skins resolved themselves into a committee on "ways and means," no one of them all could hit upon a feasible plan to storm or turn the strong position occupied by the whites.

Old Bill Williams's head had been "level," when he had chosen his defensive position. Upon three sides the river formed a natural protection, and as the current of the Little Colorado at this point was broad, strong and deep, it could not be forded, while to attempt to cross the stream by swimming exposed to the deadly fire of the sure-sighted mountain-men was not to be thought of.

And the night, too—the dark and dismal night which had so often served the bloody purposes of the painted fiends since the history of the border began, the night would not serve their turn now, for the moon, round as the shield of the Indian warrior, rose early, and its light gave aid and comfort to the adventuring white-skins.

The Indian braves were in a quandary; a dozen plans were proposed and rejected, and at last, reluctantly, the Apaches came to the conclusion that nothing but a bold and desperate attack would serve their turn.

At any cost the whites must be dislodged from their position, and since there was no other way lives must be lost so that scalps might be won.

This decision arrived at, the chiefs at once prepared for the fight.

Their favorite mode of attack would not serve them in this instance; there could be no creeping in with the tiger's wily art upon the foe—no hiding in ambush until almost within arm's length and then a sudden dash and a bloody fight at close quarters.

On the contrary, there was an open, treeless, brushless plain a thousand feet wide, almost as smooth as the palm of a man's hand, without cover enough to hide a jack-rabbit, and this plain must be crossed in full face of the white man's fire, yet with true savage stoicism they prepared for the attack. What mattered death so long as they fell like warriors with their faces to the foe, sure of a quick passage to the blessed realms of the Happy Hunting-grounds?

And while the savages were preparing for the desperate enterprise, on their part the whites were no less active.

"They're coming for us, boys!" admonished the old scout, as he noticed the red-skins at the close of their war-council stealing through the edge of the timber. "Durn my cats! if I don't believe that they air going to charge right at us! They must be r'iled worse than a mountain crick arter a thunder-storm for to do that, for it ain't savage tactics, nohow you kin fix it, for to stand up and fight like men."

"It is their only chance," Spanish Pete observed, rolling a cigarette dexterously between his fingers; "they cannot attack us in any other way, and they trust to their numbers to overwhelm us in one desperate rush."

"Lemme see!" observed Williams, thoughtfully. "We must make every shot tell, and we mustn't all fire together, for if the red devils ever git into this patch of timber, and catch us with our revolvers empty, we're gone 'coons, for sure. Now, hyer's four rifles. I reckon I'm 'bout as good a rifle-shot as the average, and I s'pose you chaps kin each salivate your man?"

The others nodded assent to this.

"Wa-al, the moment the imps break cover, we'll open on 'em with the rifles, then all you boys toss 'em to me, and I'll reload while you go for 'em with your revolvers; by the time you've emptied your weapons I'll have the rifles ready ag'in, and while I'm blazing away with my tools, mebbe you'll have time to reload. Anyway, we're good for 'bout eleven shots apiece, and out of eleven we ought to be sure of ten, at the least, and if we kin down thirty or forty of the reds in crossing the opening, I reckon on that the rest will fight shy of us, for these bucks are no better fighters than good solid white men, and I bet you that sich a reception would make the best troops in the world sick."

"Look out! they're coming!" Colonel Bill exclaimed; his keen eyes had detected a movement in the Indian line.

Manga Colorado had leaped out from behind the shelter of a pine tree into the open plain and raised the Apache war-cry, as a signal for the onset!

"I'll take the old buck!" Big Bill Williams announced; and the scout was as good as his word, for hardly had the war-shout burst from the lips of the chief, when the crack of the old mountain-man's long rifle resounded on the air. Manga's shout of defiance changed into a howl; he stumbled forward, and then dropped heavily to the ground.

Old Bill Williams had "plugged" him.

The Apaches had all sprung into the open plain, but the fall of their leader instantly checked the advance. As they halted, three more rifle-shots cracked upon the air; three more men went down, two of them stone-dead, the other badly wounded.

The fatal effect of the white men's fire seemed to madden them; loud cries of rage came pealing from their throats, and with brandished

weapons they again dashed onward. Soon they were within revolver range, when a most deadly fire was opened upon them.

Every bullet seemed to reach its mark; warrior after warrior went down, and nearly every one was either killed outright or wounded—so deliberately the whites handled their weapons. Not a shot seemed to be wasted.

It was not in human nature, be the man red or white, to charge onward in the face of such a fire, to certain death. The attacking line came to a halt; the warriors discharged an irregular, harmless volley, then breaking in disorder, those who could, fled back to the shelter of the timber.

The old scout was in his glory. "Oh, you mud-colored heathen!" he yelled, "don't show us the flat of your greasy backs, but come up and face us! come up and take your gruel like men! We ain't half salivated you yet!"

But the Apaches were too sick for more such "gruel." Twenty odd of the best warriors of the nation were either lying dead upon the field, or groaned there in terrible agony, disabled.

It was the bloodiest lesson that old Manga Colorado and his Apaches had ever received, and they cursed the hour in which the white men came into the Indian land.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE ESCAPE.

The defeat of the Apaches was complete, but they did not have to mourn the loss of their great chief, as they had expected.

The wound of Manga Colorado was a slight one, although, half stunned by the shock, he had stumbled and fallen.

Two of the braves lifted and carried him to the friendly shelter of the timber, and by the time the attack had ended and the Indians came, in sullen dismay, back to the shelter of the woods, the old chief had recovered his sense.

Great was his rage when he learned how the fight had gone, and he swore a fearful oath that he would have the scalps of the white men if he had to call upon every warrior in the tribe to take the war-path.

"We'll draw a line of fire around them!" he declared; "we'll hem them in and hold them until they starve to death, or butt their heads against our scalping-knives in endeavoring to escape."

Prompt to act, he dispatched messengers for reinforcements. The whites would not attempt to escape before nightfall, and by that time he knew that he would have men enough to completely surround them so that it would be impossible for them to break through the Indian line.

And while the Apaches lay nursing their wounds and muttering threats against the pale-faces, upon the opposite bank of the stream appeared a solitary figure.

A cry of rage went up from the throats of the old chief and his band, for it was Bronze Jack indeed!

The manner in which he had eluded pursuit was easy enough.

After his daring leap for liberty from the summit of the cliff, he had thrown himself from the back of the mustang after reaching the water, and plunging beneath the tide, swam upstream, being most expert in this art.

As luck would have it, when he came up to take breath it was in the midst of a lot of driftwood and other rubbish which had collected in a bend of the stream and now afforded ample concealment. The water was shoal so that he could touch bottom; so he remained quiet until the searching parties passed him, no one of the Indians dreaming of looking for the fugitive in such a place.

After the Indians had passed, all he had to do was to go up the stream, and when the bluffs ended, the wooded banks of the river afforded ample concealment.

Jack had followed the stream closely, for he reasoned that, after his escape, the Indians would turn their attention to his companions, and he knew that Williams would keep to the river and get as near the old Yuma town as possible.

The sound of the battle, which had come distinctly to his ears as he wended his way up the stream, indicated the exact position occupied by the whites.

He had arrived in time to witness the discomfiture of the red men and saw them retreat to the timber, but hesitated to advance for some time, meditating upon the best means of joining his companions.

At last he decided that to swim the stream was the most feasible plan as he was beyond reach of the Indian fire.

Loud cries of rage came from the savages as they held him advance boldly to the edge of the stream and plunge into the water, and they rose from their coverts in the bushes and gesticulated violently, but did not attempt any hostile movement; they had far too much respect for the death-dealing rifles of the white men to again face them, if they could help it.

Old Bill Williams sprung to his feet, and doubling up his huge fist shook it in menace at the red foe.

"Come on, consarn your ugly pictures!" he

howled; "come on and take another dish of soup! We're the boyees that kin salivate you, tooth and toe-nail!"

But the Apaches refused to accept the polite invitation; so Jack swam the river and joined his comrades without molestation.

Gladly the band greeted their redoubtable leader; and in response to their questions he related what had befallen him since he had parted from them and all listened in rapt attention.

"And, boys, I tell you what it is, we're in a pesky scrape!" he added, in conclusion.

"That's a fact!" the old scout assented.

"I had no idea when we started in on this expedition that we were going to stir up such a hornet's-nest, but the fact is the Apaches look upon the region of the old Yuma town as sacred ground and they are determined to prevent us from going there if it lies in their power. Through this John Mustang, the Red Gold-Hunter chief, they have learned of our purpose and know what our design is as well as we do ourselves; and now the question is, are we strong enough to fight our way through and get into the old ruin in spite of Manga Colorado and his Apaches?"

The adventurers looked at each other gravely.

They had beaten the Apaches in a good, fair fight, but to leave the shelter of their position and force a passage through the opposing host—ah! that was quite another thing. In fact, as the old scout remarked, "it was a mule of a different color."

"And, boys," continued Jack, "the Apaches aren't going to be content with the thrashing they have received. I saw messengers depart from them just now; they go after reinforcements, you may be sure, and although, so far, we have the best of it, yet if old Manga brings five or six hundred warriors into the field, as he can, the chances are that in the end he will have our scalps."

"Wa al, captain, I reckon that the quicker we git out of this the healthier it will be for us," Old Bill concluded.

"Yes; the quicker we pull up stakes and get out the better!" Jack assented. "I hate to give up the expedition, but I've only got one scalp and I don't care to lose that for all the gold in the old Yuma town or in all the Apache land."

"And now the question afore the meeting is, how are we going to puckachee?" put in Old Bill.

"The same way that I got in—to swim for it. If we are careful we can steal a march on the varmints yonder, but of course they will be after us the moment they see what we are up to, and then it will be a running fight clean from here to Big Walnut Camp."

"I know the country like a book, and I reckon that I kin pilot you thar, 'Paches or no 'Paches!" Williams declared, confidently.

"Well, let's be about it at once, for if my guess is right we've no time to lose; a fresh swarm of red-skins will soon come to join their brothers."

Skillfully the movement was performed, and the savages had not the slightest suspicion that the whites intended to retreat until they plunged into the stream; but when they saw the whites in the water, striking out for the other shore, they rushed for the stream, but by the time they reached the bank the adventurers had gained the opposite shore, and halting they deliberately opened fire at the red-men, who were capering like so many monkeys at the edge of the water.

The Apaches at once broke for cover again, and the whites, taking advantage of the panic, ran at the top of their speed toward the wild and broken country which lay to the southwest.

And when the red-skins saw the whites disappear in the timber, they plucked up heart to cross the river and follow; not rashly, but with care and caution for they had learned to respect the prowess of the foe.

Manga Colorado smiled, grimly.

"Before nightfall I will cage these pale-faces!" he said, "and then my people shall have a feast they will remember."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE MESSENGER.

The old red chief, to be as good as his word, dispatched a messenger to the Indian village to hurry up the reinforcements while he himself, at the head of his braves, followed hard upon the track of the fugitives.

But the Apaches had to deal with a man fully as cunning as themselves, for the old scout took command of the party by Jack's request, the adventurer knowing that Williams in this line stood second to no man on earth.

It was diamond cut diamond in this flight and pursuit, but despite of Williams's skill the Apaches pressed the fugitives close, and finally, at night, the pursuit became so hot that the whites were forced to take refuge in a little island of timber that stood in the midst of a small prairie through which ran the headwaters of Rio Verde, or San Francisco river.

The Indians spreading out in a circle com-

pletely surrounded this little clump of timber, and now felt sure of their prey.

Manga nodded significantly to the chief warriors who surrounded him as they crouched in the tall prairie grass.

"Did I not tell you?" he exclaimed. "Before another moon comes up the Apaches will have the scalps of all these white devils!"

The old warrior did not intend to make any offensive movement. It was his policy to lie in ambush until hunger and thirst should force the white-kins to break through his line. He was playing a waiting game this time.

But the adventurers knew what was the true situation.

"I tell you what it is, boyees!" Williams exclaimed, "something has got to be done. If we stay hyer long enough this old heathen is bound to gobble us up. We ain't far from Big Walnut Camp now, and if you air all agreeable I'll jest try to slip through these imps and go fur the camp."

"Do you think you can raise the miners to come to our assistance?" Bronze Jack asked, thoughtfully.

"To thunder with the miners!" the old scout exclaimed; "what do I want with them? Ain't the sodgers there?"

"Ah, but do you think *they* will trouble themselves about us?"

"Why not? We ain't in the 'Pache land now, and the heathen ain't got no call to take our skulps anyway! Oh, the sodgers will come, sure enough."

Jack rather doubted this, for he had a shrewd suspicion that in the captain of the post he had a bitter enemy, but he knew that Williams would leave no stone unturned to bring assistance, and he felt pretty certain that he could get assistance from the miners if the troops would not come.

The plan for Williams's escape was quickly arranged. The adventurers, headed by Bronze Jack, made a dash to the south, as though they intended to cut through the Indian line. In hot haste the Apaches gathered for the fight, anticipating that the pale-faces really intended to break away; and taking advantage of the feint the old scout stole off to the northward, making his way serpent-like through the tall grass without exciting the attention of the red warriors.

After a brief skirmish the whites fell back again to the shelter of the timber; and the redskins, glorying over what seemed to them like a victory, again drew their lines around the prairie island, little thinking that they had been the victim of a successful ruse, and that one of the most daring of the adventurers had succeeded in escaping.

Bronze Jack and Williams in consultation had closely calculated the time. It would take at least twenty hours for the scout to reach Big Walnut Camp and return with the troops, so that relief could not be expected before the next night.

A siege of that length the adventurers could stand well enough. They had a small supply of food and their flasks were filled with water. Four and twenty hours they could hold out, but not much longer.

There was very little doubt that the old Apache chief was too well satisfied with the fighting abilities of the corralled men to again expose his men by a dash on the whites, and would leave it for hunger and thirst to force the adventurers to abandon their strong position and attack him in his.

Williams, circling around until he got in the rear of the Indians, struck off to the south, and, guided by the stars, headed straight for Big Walnut Camp.

In due time he arrived in the mining town, and his appearance there created a great deal of excitement; the citizens crowded around him, anxious to know what had become of the rest of the party.

"Shet up in a prairie island like a bird into a cage," was Williams's startling but truthful reply, "and that's what I'm hyer for. I sneaked through the varmints and now I'm arter the sodgers for to go for the red bucks."

The old scout proceeded directly to the fort upon the hillside and demanded an audience with the captain.

Dinwiddie received his caller ungraciously enough, but listened attentively until he unfolded his errand.

"No, sir!" the officer exclaimed, decidedly, after the scout had finished; "you've come to the wrong shop after assistance. Not a man will I send. I told you in advance that you had no business to go into the Apache land, and that you took your lives in your hands if you went. You would not listen to me, but insisted upon going, although I absolutely used force to endeavor to restrain you. And now that you have got yourself into a hobbie with your own rashness, you had better find some way to get out without coming whining to me. I won't lift a finger to aid you!"

"And you'll let my pardners be skulped by those thieving Apache bucks of Manga Colorado?" the old mountain-man demanded, in rage.

"Yes, it will serve 'em right!" Dinwiddie replied, testily. "Why did they go into the In-

dian land? They have no one to blame in the matter but themselves."

"And you ain't gwine to order out your sodgers and go for these red devils?"

"Nary time!" responded the officer, tersely.

"Waal, then, all I've got to say is, if the United States is played out, the quicker people find it out the better!" and the old ranger turned upon his heel to depart.

"When your pardners, as you call them, feel the knives of the Apaches at their throats, perhaps they will regret that they did not heed my warning and refrain from this wild-goose-chase into Apache land."

"Now don't you count your chickens afore they are hatched!" the old mountain-man exclaimed, turning suddenly upon the other. "My pardners ain't skulped and dead and buried yet! Thar's a heap of chance for their lives; you and your sodgers ain't the only men that thar is in this hyer country. Thar's a heap of good, right honest men in Big Walnut Camp, and I reckon that when I march out into the street, lift up my voice and howl, thar will be more volunteers a-willing to foller my lead and strike for the mountains than you kin shake a stick at in a month of Sundays."

Dinwiddie started to his feet; he had not anticipated this movement.

"Hallo!" he cried; "that's your game, is it?"

"You kin jest bet all the rocks that you have got onto that!" Williams replied, triumphantly.

"Well, sir, I shall have to block that game!" the captain exclaimed, decidedly. "I cannot permit an armed expedition to invade the Indian country. I shall interfere to prevent it with all the force at my command."

The old scout laughed in derision.

"Why, see hyer, cap'n, you won't attempt to do no sich foolish thing as that, will you? The very boys in the streets would laugh at you! Hyer's some good, honest white men penned up for slaughter by a pack of savages, and you think that you kin keep assistance from going to 'em! Wa-al, sir, it can't be did, as you will diskiver afore you are six hours older. Jest come along with me down into the town and see how I'll wake the boyees up."

The officer made no reply, but watched the old scout in angry, sullen silence.

In truth, knowing the temper of the miners as he did, he understood that it would be useless to attempt to interfere, unless he had force enough and was willing to risk a pitched battle.

Williams was boiling over with rage; he never had a very great respect for the commander of the post, and the officer's indifference to the peril of his comrades excited his supreme contempt.

"The durned ramrod-backed mutton-head!" he ejaculated, in wrath. "For two cents I'd jest mash him flatter nor a pancake!"

The scout was right at the door which led from the quarters into the open air as he uttered the exclamation, and he was somewhat surprised as a firm grasp was laid upon his arm.

CHAPTER XXIII.

UNEXPECTED AID.

WILLIAMS turned quickly; he presumed that it was Dinwiddie; he thought that the officer had followed him and overheard his rather uncomplimentary expression.

But, as he turned, to his astonishment he came face to face with a woman, although he never would have guessed from the firm pressure upon his arm that it was not a man's muscular hand that gripped him.

"Do nothing rash!" exclaimed the lady, who was no other than the beautiful sister of the commander of the post; "your friends shall be saved!"

"That is jest what I reckon or else my name ain't Big Bill Williams!" the old scout replied, stoutly.

"Do not attempt to invoke the aid of the citizens," she continued.

"And why not, marm?" Williams demanded. "Whar else on top of this hyer broad earth am I to raise a crowd?"

"My brother, Captain Dinwiddie, will aid you."

"Blessed ef he talked that air way jest now!" the scout blurted out.

"I know him better than you do," the lady responded, significantly. "He will go to the assistance of your friends with all the force that is needed."

Williams stared; he was incredulous, although the manner of the speaker carried conviction with it.

"Waal, marm, I hope that you know what you air talking about, and that everything is jest as you say, but from what he sed to me it, r'ally seemed as if it was jest old pie to him to see my pardners slaughtered by these pesky red imps."

"You cannot always tell by what men say," she replied, quickly. "My brother is irritable, and he has no reason to like either you or your companions, nevertheless, he will come to their rescue. How many men are required?"

"Not less than twenty-five, and if they fotch along one of the light mountain guns it will be

useful, for the reds hate a shell worse than they do p'ison."

"You shall have twenty-five men and the gun!" Miss Dinwiddie exclaimed, promptly.

"When?" The old scout was still dubious.

"To-night at eight o'clock."

Williams shook his head.

"Time is mighty valuable to men situated like my pardners air," he observed, slowly.

"They can hold out until midnight?"

"Yes, I reckon that they kin."

"Four hours' ride will bring the troops to the scene of action?"

"Yes, if they are well-mounted."

"They shall have the best horses in the garrison!"

"And midnight is a mighty good hour, too, to go for the reds," the old scout remarked, reflectively.

"The boom of the gun and the screech of the hurtling shell will make them think that a legion of demons have broken loose upon them!"

"That's so, marm, that's so!" cried the scout, astonished at the energy of the lady.

"You will act as guide?"

"Yes, marm."

"Wait on the outskirts of the camp on the northern trail, and promptly at eight the detachment shall join you."

"All right, marm: I'll do just as you say, for I reckon that I kin trust you, although your brother made me as mad as all get-out."

"At eight, remember, and a word of caution—say nothing in the town in regard to the expedition, for these Apaches have allies in every frontier camp. No rumor must reach them of the expedition or else the surprise may be defeated."

"Oh, I kin keep my 'tater-trap shet, marm; you never find an old mountain-man like I am much given to blabbing."

"Adieu then, and do not fear to place implicit trust in me." And then the lady retraced her steps along the passageway, leaving the scout in a state of considerable bewilderment.

"Durn my cats! if that gal ain't a screamer!" he muttered, as he emerged into the sunlight. "A regular snorter and no mistake, and I reckon that she will live up to her word, every time."

In order to avoid questioning the scout did not descend into the town but betook himself to the far-off hillside, where, under the shelter of a convenient clump of pines he coiled himself up dog-fashion, and in ten minutes was fast asleep. He had lived so long in the wilderness that he had got into the Indian habit of making the most of a favorable opportunity to snatch either rest or refreshment. And not until the sun was low in the heavens did he awake. He had made up for lost time, and like a giant refreshed with wine he was ready for new deeds of daring.

The scout's first glance was to the west, and as he noted that the shades of evening-tide were lowering over the land, his spirits rose. His impatient soul was eager for action.

From the scanty stores which he had with him he made a hearty meal, washing the repast down with water that gushed from the rivulet at his feet, and by the time he had finished twilight had set in. Never to mortal man was the coming on of night more welcome. His soul thirsted for the fray, and already, in his mind's eye, he saw the arrogant red-skins fleeing in dismay from the charge of the troops, their flight accelerated by the death-dealing shell.

At the period of which we write the Apaches and kindred tribes had had very little experience of artillery, and in an action with the red bucks in the wild mountain region a single light gun was worth at least a hundred men.

Williams betook himself to the outskirts of the town, circling around it so as to avoid encountering any anxious soul that might seek to question him, and squatted down by the trail leading northward.

From the position that he occupied, which was on higher ground than the town, he commanded a view of the camp, and anxiously he watched for the appearance of the troops. He had the most perfect faith that they would come, for, although he had been slow to yield to belief, yet now that he had done so not a particle of distrust was in his mind.

The shades of night grew darker and darker, and at last completely covered in the earth.

All that the scout could distinguish of the town was the lights glimmering from the windows of the cabins beneath him in the valley.

"It must be pesky near onto eight," he muttered, and then, even as the words escaped his lips, his keen ears, rendered wonderfully acute by the schooling which for years he had given them, distinguished the sound of the short trot of horses, amid which the jingle of weapons could be heard.

"It's them, for sure!" he cried, rising in glee.

The guess was not wrong, for soon a troop of horsemen appeared, about thirty in number; an officer rode at the head; by his side a spare horse, and in the rear of the party was one of the famous mountain guns, a light-metaled piece, mounted, not upon a carriage, but upon the back of a mule, so that no matter how bad the road, wherever a horseman could go the gun could go also.

"Blamed if it ain't the cap'n!" Williams muttered, for he at once, despite the darkness, recognized the slight figure of the commander of the garrison.

He had felt no doubt in regard to the troops coming, for the manner of the girl had duly impressed him, but he had not believed that Dinwiddie in person would lead the expedition.

"I reckon that the gray mare is the best hoss of this team," was the muttered reflection as the trooper rode up.

The officer nodded stiffly, and Williams returned the salutation in the same spirit, for, as he would have expressed it, if he had put his thoughts into words, he didn't give a curse for any man-jack that was hatched. Then the officer pointed to the spare horse, and the scout understood that this signified that the beast was for him.

He was not surprised at the other not speaking, for of course he understood, after what had occurred, that the captain did not feel in the best of humor in regard to him.

Williams vaulted at once into the saddle, put himself at the head of the party, and the trooper rode on.

For quite a distance the trail was an excellent one, and the expedition pushed on at a good pace; and then, when the country began to grow rougher and more broken, the moon came up so as to afford ample light.

Just about midnight the party came to the edge of the prairie in whose center the island was situated where the adventurers had taken refuge.

So carefully and cautiously had Williams conducted the advance, that, though the troopers were within a short quarter of a mile of the Indian line, the Apaches had no idea that any mortals except themselves and their destined prey were anywhere in the neighborhood.

The plan of the attack was quickly arranged.

"Open fire with the gun; throw three or four shells at them and then charge like a lot of devils!" exclaimed the old scout, graphically.

Williams knew that the shells bursting in their midst would demoralize the Indians, and that when the charge was made, the chances were almost ten to one that the Apaches would believe themselves surrounded and entrapped, and that they would break for their wild lairs in all directions. And the scout knew, too, that at the first signal of assistance being near, the beleaguered adventurers would do their part to annoy the savages.

All was prepared, and at the signal the gun opened fire—the mule upon which it was mounted bracing himself like a rock, splendidly trained, to await the recoil.

Away went the shell, screeching through the air, and so well had the scout posted the gunner that the messenger of death burst right in the midst of the Indian line, killing a couple of braves and badly wounding six or eight more.

Never was a foe more astonished or dismayed. The Apaches did not wait for a second shell, but took to their heels in wild disorder, with loud shouts of terror.

Williams understood at once that the field was won.

"Go for 'em, boys!" he yelled; "charge, or we won't get no show for our money!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A SURPRISE.

AND charge the troopers did with right good will. The Indians, taken by surprise, demoralized by the fire of the field-piece, and imagining that they were about to be slaughtered at wholesale, retreated in confusion. In fact, their flight could hardly be termed a retreat, for they fled at the top of their speed, each man for himself, and all with one idea uppermost in their minds, to get away from their foe as fast as possible.

It was an almost bloodless victory, after the damage done by the shell, for the troopers never got near enough to the fleeing savages to harm them.

The siege raised, the rescued men came from the prairie island, and eagerly greeted their preservers.

At such a time, and after such a deed, remembrance of the difficulty which he had had with the captain lingered not in the mind of such a man as Bronze Jack; so he at once approached the officer, who sat upon his horse, waiting for the return of the troopers, who had scattered somewhat in the charge.

"Captain, there has been bad blood between us!" the plainsman exclaimed; "but, after this night's work let the past be forgotten. You have rendered my comrades and myself a service that I will not soon forget, and if at any time I can return the favor, rest assured that I shall jump eagerly to the task."

Despite the light of the moon, the night was not very clear, and as the officer was partly in the shade cast by the trees of the prairie island, and his hat was pulled low down over his eyes, the expression upon his face could not be plainly discerned.

The horseman looked around: none of the soldiers were near, all being grouped by the other side of the tree-clump in conversation with the men whom they had rescued.

The leader of the troopers, looking Bronze Jack straight in the face, lifted up the hat which shaded the features.

In spite of the almost complete command that the adventurer had over himself, a low cry of surprise escaped from him as he gazed upon the features thus plainly revealed to him.

Indeed it was a strange masquerade.

The rider was the superb Cleopatra Dinwiddie, disguised in her brother's uniform.

"Do not betray me!" she cried, with a cautioning gesture. "It was to save your life that I risked this bold attempt. My brother is mad with rage against you, and, although it tears my heart to say it, yet it is the truth and should be spoken: he would have permitted yourself and comrades to be slaughtered here without raising a finger to prevent it. I know my brother well; when his mind is once fixed upon a purpose nothing can alter it, no matter how wrong the idea may be. I knew that argument would be wasted upon him, and so I took advantage of his slight illness. I am his doctor, and when I gave him his evening potion, I substituted a sleeping draught. It took effect, and I improved the opportunity to disguise myself in his uniform, and order out the squad. The very boldness of the attempt insured its success."

"Well, miss, all I can say is, I sincerely hope the time may come when I will be able to show you how truly grateful I am for the service you have done me, and until that hour does come I must be content to remain your debtor."

"Do not speak of it, sir," she replied, quickly. "I have acted only as a Christian should act, for it is our duty in this world to aid our fellow-creatures."

The approach of the rest of the party at this moment put a stop to the conversation.

"Hyer, take my hoss, Jack!" Williams exclaimed; "durned if I hadn't ruther hooft it to the town!"

The leader of the adventurers would have declined, but the old scout would not take no for an answer, and so at last Jack accepted the mount, and the party started at once upon the homeward march.

The disguised lady and the adventurer rode in the van; the troopers followed after, and the adventurers brought up the rear.

"Tell me," said the lady, with all a woman's curiosity, as they rode along, "what did you seek in this wild land? Surely, it was a bold adventure for you to attempt, with your little party, to penetrate into the very heart of the Apache country."

Briefly, then, the adventurer explained to her the quest that he was on, related to her the wild legend of the golden treasure which lay buried in the old Yuma town.

"And will you again attempt to find the gold?" she asked.

"No; I have failed, and failed utterly. The Indians regard the spot as sacred ground and will fight to the death to preserve it from the polluting tread of the hated white man. I had no idea of the deep feeling with which they regarded it, nor the bitterness with which they fight against invasion. The attempt is a hopeless one, and it is but rank folly to follow a losing game."

"And is it simply because the Apaches are resolved not to allow the whites to trespass upon their territory that such a fierce attack has been made upon your party?"

"That is the principal reason I presume, although I am somewhat puzzled at one thing."

"And what is that?" she asked, betraying a strange interest in the fortunes of the adventurer.

"From some source, to me unknown, the Indians were warned of my expedition and were on the watch for us from the beginning. The moment we entered the Apache land the smoke signal of danger ascended from the hill-top. In fact, I doubt if we took a step after we crossed the border without it being known to the Apache chief, Manga Colorado. My expedition is a failure; and now it remains for me to discover the secret foe who helped to make it so."

The girl was silent, but if she had chosen she could have told the adventurer there existed not upon the earth a bitterer foe to him than the man whose uniform she wore.

After quite a long pause the lady spoke:

"You will remain in Big Walnut Camp, then?"

"Yes, until I discover what I seek."

"A single request I have to make you!" she exclaimed, abruptly.

"It shall be granted, lady, if it is in my power," he replied, instantly.

"My brother—"

"I understand," and a cloud came over his face as he spoke; "but I fear that what you seek it will be impossible for me to grant. If I am attacked I must strike back; I cannot tamely submit."

"Oh, no, I do not expect that; it is not in human nature; but avoid trouble if you can."

"You may rest assured that I will not seek it."

And with this the lady was content; the adventurer could not promise more.

Night was gone and morning breaking fresh

and clear when the party arrived at the mining town.

No one was astir though, as the soldiers and the adventurers came, in the dusk of the morning, through the silent street.

"Here we part," said the disguised lady, giving her hand to the man whom she had rescued from so much danger and in such a strange way; "remember your promise!"

"I shall not forget."

The troopers rode off toward the fort, while the plainsmen began to batter at the door of one of the shanty hotels, with the intent of invoking the hospitalities of the host.

So far the trick had succeeded to perfection; not one of the soldiers suspected the deception that had been put upon them, but, as the light began to strengthen, the lady thought it wise to avoid the chance of recognition, although there was such a wonderful likeness between herself and the man she represented that there was not much danger of the trick being discovered as long as the gloom lasted.

She turned over the squad to corporal and galloped on ahead.

At the fort she dismounting, resigned her horse to the care of the orderly and entered the quarters occupied by her brother and herself.

Cautiously opening the door of the captain's apartment she peeped in. She thought to find the captain still sleeping but she was wrong. He was up, dressed, and at once came forward to meet her.

Perceiving that detection was unavoidable she advanced into the room, closing the door carefully behind her.

Dinwiddie's surprise at beholding his sister thus strangely disguised was great. For a moment he stared at her and then his amazement found vent in words:

"What is the meaning of this masquerade?" he cried.

Cleopatra was a bold, brave girl and not at all ashamed of what she had done; so she answered, instantly, without hesitation:

"I have been representing you, brother, for a short time, and have taken command of the post."

Of course, as the captain hadn't the slightest suspicion of the daring deed which she had performed he was utterly in the dark as to her meaning.

"You have been representing me and have taken command of the post?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, and, as the commander of the post, I called out a squad of men and went to the assistance of the gold-seekers who were besieged by the Apaches."

Dinwiddie fairly gasped for breath as he realized the full meaning of her words.

"It is not possible!" he cried.

"Oh, but it is!" she replied. "I overheard your conversation with the old scout, Williams, and I determined that the gold-seekers should be rescued from their peril, so I waited until you fell asleep, then I donned your uniform and called out the men. No one suspected the trick and the result was I attacked the Apaches and scattered them like a tornado!"

CHAPTER XXV.

AN EXPLANATION.

DINWIDDIE'S rage was unbounded; for a few moments his anger choked his utterance, but at last he found himself able to speak.

"How dare you?" he exclaimed, hoarsely; "how dare you attempt such a thing? Have you no shame?"

"Shame!" and Cleopatra flushed crimson to the very temples as she uttered the word.

"Yes, shame. Suppose any of the soldiers had discovered you?"

"I risked that and was not afraid of it!" the girl replied, proudly. "You, in a fit of petty anger, refused to do your duty and go to the rescue of your brothers, attacked by these ruthless red-men. I simply performed that duty for you."

"And wherefore did you go?" he demanded, hotly. "You had some strong motive for this unwomanly action! Are you in love with this cutthroat blackguard?"

Again the face of the girl flushed as red as fire.

"You forget yourself!" she exclaimed, proudly, turning upon her heel to depart; "you forget to whom you are speaking."

"By Heaven! You forgot yourself when you allowed this wild idea to carry you away. If you had been detected in this disguise, my mortification would have surpassed all words."

"And my mortification surpassed all words," she retorted, "when I overheard you refuse to aid the gold-seekers. I would not have believed that such a thing could be possible if I had not the testimony of my own ears."

"You are blind or you would see that this man is my deadly foe!"

"Friend or foe, it was your duty to stand by him when attacked by the red-skins!" she retorted.

"It is useless to talk to you; you have a woman's foolish ideas upon this subject, but I hope that you will never perform such an act of folly again."

"If ever another such occasion comes, and the reasons for my action are as strong as they were this time, I shall most assuredly do as I have done!" and with this declaration the girl swept proudly from the room.

The captain allowed her to depart without venturing a word; he knew his sister of old, and understood that when she thought she was in the right, she had a will of iron, which could neither be bent nor broken.

Dinwiddie had risen early, for he had gone to sleep at dusk, and for some hours he was forced to remain inactive; but as soon as the garrison got astir he proceeded to cautiously ascertain what was thought of the night expedition which had resulted so successfully, and to his complete astonishment he found that no one had the slightest suspicion that any one but himself had led the party.

"She carried it out bravely enough," he muttered, as he left the mess-table, after being congratulated by his brother-officers upon the successful expedition.

Dinwiddie strolled outside of the fort and cast his eyes carefully to the north-west.

As he had expected, a little column of smoke was curling up on the air from a point in the hills about a mile from the fort. It was, he well understood, the signal that Manga Colorado was there and that he wanted a talk.

"He must have been terribly astonished and enraged when the troops struck him last night," Dinwiddie muttered, as he mounted into the saddle. "I wonder that the old rascal dares to come in so near the fort, this morning; he is so full of treachery himself that he generally looks for it in others, and after last night's adventure he has good reason to doubt me."

Ten minutes' gallop brought the captain to the little clump of timber from the cones of which the smoke ascended.

As Dinwiddie expected, the old chief was there, and moody and savage enough he glared at the officer as he dismounted.

The old rascal had suffered in the skirmish, or, to speak more correctly, not exactly in the skirmish, but in the headlong flight that succeeded the successful attack.

The Apaches had been so panic-stricken that they had not heeded which way they ran and turned not aside for bush or brier, and the old Apache, who in the flight had become entangled in a wild bramble-patch, had scratched his massive face severely, so that he looked as if he had been having a fierce battle with a wild-cat.

"How!" exclaimed Manga, sulkily, as the officer came up to him.

"That was an unfortunate affair last night," Dinwiddie hastened to say.

"Dam!" cried the old chief, thus tersely expressing his opinion regarding the skirmish.

"I was ill, and went to sleep at sundown, and the party started unknown to me and without my orders."

The old chief looked at the soldier suspiciously; it was plain that he was not quite satisfied.

"It is the truth, Manga, I assure you!" Dinwiddie exclaimed. "I knew nothing of the matter at all until this morning when the soldiers returned. You should have faith in me. What reason have I to attack you at the very moment when you held my foes—the men I hate—in your grasp, and were about to crush them and so save me the trouble?"

The savage nodded; this seemed correct, and he began to believe that the other was speaking the truth. If he had happened to have seen the disguised woman, it would have been a different matter, for then nothing in this world would have convinced him that it was not the captain; but the Apache had not waited to get a sight of their foes but had fled at the top of their speed the moment the charge was made.

Finding that the chief was disposed to listen to reason the captain explained that the scout had craved assistance, and owing to his illness (the captain's) the force had been dispatched without consultation with him. His sister's part in the affair he kept to himself.

Manga professed himself satisfied with the explanation.

"And now, chief, that you are satisfied I have acted fair and honest in the matter, when are you going to keep your agreement with me? When may I look for your daughter, Chito?"

"Squaws are strange creatures sometimes," the Apache remarked, evasively.

The officer knitted his brows; he fancied that the red-skin was going to back out of his bargain.

"Sometime; they say don't like and no tell why."

"She is not coming then?"

"Oh, yes, she come."

"What do you mean, then, by what you have just said?"

"She come, but she no come to stay unless she like," the old chief declared.

"Oh, certainly; that is understood!" Dinwiddie exclaimed, quite relieved by the assurance. "Of course if Chito takes it into her head not to like me after she has made my acquaintance, and wishes to return to her people, I shall not place any obstacles in her way; I fancy, though, that I shall be able to make myself

agreeable to the girl, and that I can succeed in inducing her to accept my protection."

"You will make her your squaw?" asked the old chief, suspiciously.

"Oh, yes."

"Just the same as though she was a white woman?"

"Exactly the same."

"It is good!" exclaimed the Apache, with a grunt of satisfaction. "Chito is the very flower of the Apache nation. If you should wrong her there is not a red brave in our land that would not take the war-path against you."

"Have no fear on that score, chief," replied Dinwiddie, confidently. "I have taken a great fancy to the girl, although I have not seen her over half a dozen times, and she is the only woman that I have ever seen, red or white, that I would care to make my squaw."

The captain was apparently honest in his declaration, and he strove by every means in his power to appear so; but, in truth, Dinwiddie was a deep and wily schemer. He had an idea that there were some wonderfully rich mines in the Apache land, for every little while some red brave, when under the influence of the potent fire-water, would brag of the great golden stores that lay hid in the wild mountain ravines, and hint mysteriously that the wild sons of the wilderness could easily lead their white brothers to certain spots where, in an hour, a man could pick up golden nuggets enough to make him rich for a lifetime, were it not for the great, unwritten law of the red-men which forbade the action.

The officer, in common with nearly all the miners, held that there was something more in these yarns than mere idle talk, for on many occasions the braves had brought into the town small nuggets of virgin gold which they had traded off for various things.

Dinwiddie's idea was simple enough; he intended to marry the Indian girl—marry her after the Indian fashion, which was all that the simple children of nature thought to be necessary; then, through her aid, to learn where these secret mines were in the mountains, get hold of enough gold to make him rich for life; then, good-by to an army career and to the western frontier forever!

Manga appeared to be perfectly satisfied with the assurance, and turned upon his heel as if to depart, when there was an unexpected rush of some ten men upon the scene.

Bronze Jack headed the party; behind him came the old mountain-man, Big Bill Williams; after Williams the rest of the adventurers, while a few of the leading miners of the town brought up the rear.

And it was plain that they all meant "business."

CHAPTER XXVI.

MANGA'S PLEDGE.

BOTH the officer and the Indian were taken entirely by surprise, for the new-comers had advanced so cautiously that neither one of the two had any idea that they were near until they came around the clump of pines.

Bronze Jack had had his suspicions in regard to Dinwiddie. He believed that there was some secret understanding between the officer and the old Apache chief, and suspected that, sooner or later, the Indian would come to the fort to complain of the treatment he had received at the hands of the soldiers.

So the adventurer arranged to have a close watch kept upon the fort and its inmates.

The little curling smoke which had arisen on the hillside, and which had served to signal Dinwiddie that Manga desired to see him, had not escaped the eyes of the old scout, to whom Jack had confided his suspicions, and he, with his great knowledge of the Indian ways, at once jumped to the conclusion that some red chief upon the hillside desired a "talk" with some one in the town.

Williams at once warned Jack in regard to the smoke, and he immediately saw how extremely probable it was that the old scout's idea was correct.

The expedition of the adventurers had excited a great deal of talk in the town, and the miners, universally, were bitter in their expressions regarding the old Apache butcher and his red gang.

Bronze Jack had done his best to encourage this feeling, for he had an idea that in the near future he should need the assistance of the miners.

The plans of the adventurer had been well laid; one of his band kept constant watch upon the fort, and so careful was the watch, that the very moment the captain quitted the fort and made toward the hillside, the watcher at once hurried to communicate the news to his chief.

Jack then proceeded to rouse the citizens. He had spoken to a few of the leading men of the town, being careful, however, not to reveal the full extent of his suspicions, and so it was that the interview between Dinwiddie and the Apache chief was so rudely and unexpectedly interrupted.

A dark frown gathered upon the brow of the captain as the new-comers came so suddenly upon the scene; and as for the old Indian chieftain,

despite the stolid reserve which was so great a trait of the Indian character, a look of alarm crept over his face. These armed and hostile-looking white men meant mischief, and he knew that he really deserved no mercy after the savage manner in which he had attacked the white adventurers in the wilderness.

"Hyer he is, by the eternal hookey!" Big Bill Williams yelled, as he faced the savage, menacingly. "Hyer's the head devil of the 'Pache tribe—the bow-legged, lantern-jawed red thief that bosses the Colorado country! You had your chance yesterday, but to-day I reckon that we hold the winning keerds!"

By this time Dinwiddie had recovered from his amazement, and had formed a plan of action.

"What do you mean by this, gentlemen?" he exclaimed. "What do you mean by rushing upon us in this most decidedly hostile manner?"

And, indeed, hostile enough was the appearance of the new-comers, for each and every man grasped a weapon, and from the way in which they glared at the old Indian chief it was quite plain that they longed to try them upon the person of the savage.

"Tain't you, cap'n," one of the miners replied, an old veteran, one of the original forty-niners, by the name of Perkins, and generally called Judge Perkins, for he had gray hair, a long gray beard, and a most decidedly judicial aspect. "No, sir-ee, 'tain't you! It's this heathen red buck what is our mutton!"

"This is the great Apache chief, Manga Colorado!" exclaimed Dinwiddie, with a majestic wave of his hand.

But the others were not at all impressed by the declaration.

"Oh, we know him—know him like a book," the judge answered. "He's the biggest devil of them all, and now that we've got him here, foul, we kinder calculate that we're going to have satisfaction out of him."

"He is here under my protection!" the captain cried, sternly. He resented the manner of the speaker, and was endeavoring to impress him with his own official dignity.

"Wa-al, now, cap'n, I don't mean no disrespect to you, but that sort of thing is played out. When this red buck catches us white men away from the town, he goes for our ha'r all he knows how, and as it's a poor rule that won't work both ways, we kinder think now that we've got him prowling around our ranches, we ought to put it to him, red-hot!"

"There is a treaty of peace with his tribe now, you know!" the officer warned.

"Treaty be durned!" Williams cried, emphatically. "Whar was the treaty when this old buck and his p'isoned red skunks hunted us down along the Colorado, like as if we were so many jack-rabbits?"

"White man was in the Indian land; he no business to come there."

"The blazes I hain't!" Williams retorted, in wrath, "and is it put down in black and white in this hyer treaty that you talk about that a decent white man sha'n't show his nose out of this hyer town without giving a painted 'Pache a chance at his top-knot?"

"It was understood that the Indians were not to be molested in their country," Dinwiddie explained.

"And who in thunder war molesting 'em?" the old scout growled. "Molest, blazes! The boot was on t'other leg. It was we, good, solid white men, who were molested. They went for our scalps, red-hot, and now we want satisfaction."

"Yes, that is exactly what we want," Bronze Jack chimed in. "This red butcher and his men have had everything their own way too long. What does he or his tribe care for a treaty? No white man's scalp is safe if the Apaches catch him away from the shelter of the settlement. These Indians are free to come and go in our towns without hindrance; why should we not have the same privilege in their lands, so long as we do not interfere with them?"

"The Apache land belongs to the red-men, and the pale-faces must not come there!" cried the old chief, fiercely. Despite the danger of his position he could not restrain the rage he felt at the idea of the whites entering the Indian country.

"We will!" yelled Williams, in a rage, shaking his fist threateningly at the chief. "We'll go in when we like and come out when we please, in spite of you and your dirty red dogs!"

"The fact is, capt'in," said the old miner, soberly, "we think that this hyer thing has gone on in the way it has 'bout long enough. This hyer treaty that you talk about ain't been the least bit of use to us. The reds get all the advantages and we get nothing. It ain't a fair shake, no way you kin fix it."

"The treaty ain't worth the paper that it is written on!" Jack exclaimed; "but, as far as that goes, there is an easy way to settle the matter. There is bad blood between myself and this Apache chief; he has hunted me and my party just as if we were so many wild beasts, and I want satisfaction. I don't ask odds of any man! Let him step out and draw his weapon; I will do the same; there are plenty here to see fair play. If he can beat me, well and good; I will

be satisfied, and I guess the rest will be, to let him go in peace to his native wilds again. If my own boldness and skill can avenge my wrongs, I'm above asking any one else to do it for me."

"As fair as fair kin be!" Williams declared, and from the expression upon the faces of the others it was plain that they agreed with the old scout.

But, this offer did not suit Manga Colorado at all; he had already had a taste of Bronze Jack's skill, and, to use the Westernism, he was not "hankering" after any more.

And yet the old chief, in his way, was as brave a man as ever put foot to earth, but according to his ideas, to face the adventurer, when he felt almost certain that he would meet death at his hands, was the height of folly.

Dinwiddie came to the rescue of the Indian.

"I cannot permit this affair to go on, unless the chief insists, and if I were he I should not, for I should not feel called upon as the ruler of a great nation to encounter in single fight the first adventurer that chose to attempt to draw me into a quarrel."

"Chief no fight now," Manga said, with a great deal of dignity. "Fight some other time, maybe, in Apache land."

"Yes, on your own dunghill, consarn ye!" the old scout growled, in contempt.

"See hyer, capt'n, it seems to me that this chief ain't willing to do the fair thing at all!" the judge protested. "We've got him foul now and kin talk to him, but if we let him go without making him give us some pledge as security that he will behave himself, why, jest as soon as he gets back to his red heathens again, he'll be up to his old tricks."

"What pledge—what security?"

"Me know—me give pledge!" hastily responded the Indian, his face lighting up, for his quick wits had devised a plan of escape.

All looked at the savage in astonishment, for not one of the party had any idea of the kind of pledge that he would be able to give.

"Come!" he said, speaking in the deep Apache tongue.

There was a rustling in the bushes, and then from the center of a little clump of pines stepped an Indian girl.

"This is my daughter," said the old chief, "Chito Colorado; I will leave her with my white brothers as a pledge that I will honestly keep the treaty and not war upon the pale-faces."

Manga had played a trump card, for what better security could he give than his own child, the flower of his tribe?

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

THE miners were satisfied; Jack saw that the Indian had outwitted him; what better pledge of his good faith could the chief give than his own child?

The artful savage, quick to perceive the impression which he had made, at once hastened to improve the advantage which he had gained.

"Manga Colorado is the great chief of the Apaches," he said, with true savage dignity. "His word is like unto his people; the red braves listen to the commands of their chief and they obey; but there are young men in the tribe—young warriors who burn to distinguish themselves on the war-path. The chief tells them that they must not war with their white brothers—that the pipe of peace has been smoked, and a great treaty of peace and amity signed. They promise to be good; they swear that they will hunt the buffalo and leave the white men alone, but when these wild young warriors go to hunt, right in the Indian land they find the white men. The smoke of their camp-fires scares the game away; my young men's hearts grow big with wrath; they forget the words of counsel that I give; they are blind—drunk with rage. They strike the white men and strike them hard. It is not Manga Colorado's fault. Let my white brothers keep to their own country and the red-men will never do them harm. I want peace—my nation wants peace. I do not come to my white brothers with a lie in my mouth; no! peace is in my heart—peace and good-will, and when I freely yield up my daughter as a hostage for myself and all my tribe can any one ask for more?"

The savage was a natural-born orator; and apart from the supreme skill with which the speech was delivered the matter which it contained was well calculated to carry conviction, although there was not a man acquainted with the old red rascal who could not, if he had taken the trouble to remember, have recalled a dozen instances in his dealings with the whites since their advent into the wilderness drained by the Big and Little Colorados and the Gila, where the Apache chief had protested as earnestly and sworn as fluently, and yet never kept faith at all.

But in this life mankind is always to believe that which they wish to believe, and so the false coin of the red chief was taken for good metal and the miners believed him when he swore by all that he held sacred that neither he

nor his wild young men would raise hand against the white men.

The chief had got out of the hobble in which the skill of the plainsman had involved him in an extremely clever manner.

Dinwiddie saw that Manga had produced the result at which he had aimed and he hastened to clinch the matter.

"I accept the pledge that you offer, Manga," he remarked, "although I do not really see the necessity of it, for I feel perfectly sure that you will keep faith with us. You may rest assured that while your daughter remains with me she shall be treated with the utmost care."

Every eye was turned upon the Indian girl. With downcast eyes and modest mien she stood the very picture of submission, and yet if report spoke true, never yet did prairie wild or rugged woodland hold a more untamable tiger-cat than this same Chito Colorado, sole child of the red-handed, ruthless Manga.

"Your daughter is content to remain with us?" the officer continued. A useless question, for the very presence of the girl was proof of the fact.

The girl spoke not but simply inclined her head.

One and all had watched her curiously, for in truth the girl was wondrously fair to look upon, although it was the wild, picturesque beauty of the wilderness—the beauty of the spotted snake or the tawny panther, the jungle king.

"Are the white chiefs satisfied and may I depart?" the old red warrior asked, folding his blanket around his muscular form with an almost indescribable air of dignity.

"Quite satisfied!" Dinwiddie hastened to exclaim.

"Oh, yes, it's all correct," the judge added.

The savage fixed his glittering eyes upon Bronze Jack's face, and there was a bit of quiet triumph apparent in the look.

"You've succeeded in getting out this time, Manga, but look out for the next," the adventurer cautioned.

The Indian raised his hand and shook his dusky fore-finger at the plainsman:

"Once Manga Colorado held you prisoner in the Apache village; you escaped. Take care next time or you will lose your scalp!"

And with the threat the red chief stalked away.

"Follow me and I will see that you are safely cared for," the officer said to the girl.

She bowed her head submissively and obeyed.

As the miners afterward remarked, if she was a tiger-cat, as everybody said, she showed less signs of it than any woman that had ever come into Big Walnut Camp.

The townsmen followed after the officer and the girl and the adventurers brought up the rear, Williams growling his discontent, at the way in which matters had been arranged, at a great rate.

"Durn the luck, I say!" he muttered. "We had the old red buck foul, and it's a durned shame that he managed to creep out. It's my belief that he and the capt'n are in cahoots together."

"Yes, it does look like it," Bronze Jack remarked; "but the only thing for us to do is to keep on the watch and wait for another chance to catch the Apache butcher tripping."

"I only want a single chance at him!" Williams exclaimed, vindictively, slapping his brawny hand, as he spoke, significantly, on the buck-horn handle of his hunting-knife.

"Patience! our turn will come," Jack rejoined.

"My old country proverb says that it is a long lane that has no end," Spanish Pete observed.

These reflections might be consoling, but there was no mistaking the fact that, for the present, the savage had the best of it, and had succeeded in escaping from the tight place in which he had found himself, in an extremely skillful manner.

When he arrived at the outskirts of the town, with a dignified wave of his hand the officer bade his companions adieu, and with the girl started for the fort.

"I reckon that we've got old Manga where his hair is short, this time!" the judge remarked, with a chuckle. "He won't be apt to take the war-path against us, or to allow his young bucks to do it, while we hold his daughter safe in our hands."

The adventurers looked at each other but said nothing, although not one of them agreed with the miner.

Jack had selected comfortable quarters since he had made up his mind that he would have to "hang out" at Big Walnut Camp for some little time.

There happened to be a good-sized shanty vacant just on the outskirts of the Camp, by the river, on the trail leading northward. The party who had built the shanty had departed to seek their fortunes elsewhere, leaving the house in pledge for some little bills which one of the saloon-keepers had unwisely allowed them to run up.

Jack had made a "dicker" with the saloon-keeper, and so came into possession of the shan-

ty, which was just big enough to accommodate the adventurers nicely.

The first thing that the plainsman did, after arriving at the head-quarters, was to put the watch upon the fort again. The device had succeeded so well the first time, that he felt inclined to try it a second.

The day passed slowly away, and nothing of moment occurred. After supper was over, the band sat outside of the shanty, smoked their pipes, told yarn upon yarn as they watched the sun go down behind the big peaks which intervened between the valley, wherein the mining-camp stood, and the great Pacific ocean, within whose glassy bosom the orb of day seemed to find rest.

Twilight faded into darkness; the stars came out one by one, as also did the little lights which shone through the small windows of the miners' cabins. And then the moon came slowly up, a great red ball of fire at first, but fading slowly into its natural aspect.

All the adventurers had their pockets well-lined; as a consequence, when the sound of revelry and mirth came up from the jolly miners congregated in the center of the town, where the saloons were thick, our heroes naturally wished to take a hand in the fun, Bronze Jack alone excepted. He declined his comrades' invitation to accompany them, and said that he preferred solitude and his own thoughts to the jollity of the saloons, and the wild excitement of the gaming-table.

So the rest departed and left the adventurer to his own devices.

Jack had spread a blanket on the ground, and was extended at full length, in the shadow of the shanty, with his head resting on a log, lazily puffing a cigarette, which he had rolled up with all the dexterity of a Mexican dandy.

The plainsman had given himself up to reflection, and his thoughts were not particularly pleasant ones.

So far, his expedition had been most signally unsuccessful; in his endeavor to reach the hidden treasures which were supposed to be concealed in the old Yuma town, the Apaches had beaten him at every turn, and Jack was wise enough to understand that there was not a single chance of success so long as the savages remained hostile.

Situated, as were the old ruins, right in the very heart of the Apache land, it was but utter folly to believe that the treasure could be wrested from the red-skins without being backed by a force large enough to conquer a province.

Open defiance had failed; some cunning, secret scheme might succeed if he could only think of one.

Footsteps approaching interrupted Jack's meditations. Instantly he laid his hand upon his revolver; in this wild land each new-comer was more likely to prove a foe than a friend.

Good cause had the adventurer to prepare for strife, for, as the stranger approached, Jack plainly distinguished the face and figure of John Mustang, chief of the Red Gold-Hunters!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE CHALLENGE.

THERE was no mistaking the well-known figure, and Jack at once sat bolt upright, with drawn revolver.

The adventurer was considerably astonished at beholding the chief of the Red Gold-Hunters; not that he had thought that the youth was dead, for he knew better, but he had not expected to come in contact with him quite so soon, and in fact he was much surprised, that after what had transpired, Mustang John should seek another interview with him, for such was plainly the purpose of the dark-skinned half-breed.

"Halt!" cried Jack, as the other steadily advanced, leveling his revolver at Mustang John as he spoke, although the Gold-Hunter chief manifested no hostile sign.

In obedience to the stern command, and the voice of the adventurer plainly betrayed that he was not to be trifled with, the new-comer came to a stand-still. He was within twenty feet of Jack, and the adventurer could distinguish his features quite plainly, thanks to the light afforded by the moon.

A sullen look was upon the face of the half-breed, and a peculiar baleful light shot from his eyes.

"Why do you bid me halt?" he asked; "I am not threatening you in any way."

"What do you want?" replied the adventurer, answering one question by asking another, and coming at once to the point.

"A talk with you."

"Well, you can easily be gratified if that is all you want."

"But it is not all I want—I seek your life!" cried the half-breed, fiercely.

"Exactly; so I supposed; and that is the reason why I think that you had better not approach too near to me; but, arn't you satisfied, after the taste that you have already had of my quality? Take care, my bold young brick; I am not over and above patient. I have spared you once when I held your life in the very hollow of my hand. I may not be so merciful a second time."

"You spared my life!" cried Mustang John, in a tone in which anger and contempt were strangely blended.

"Yes, I spared your life," repeated the adventurer, firmly. "It was at my mercy, and I spared it. It would have been just as easy for me to have sent the ball crashing through your brain or tearing through your heart, as to have merely creased your head with it, as I did."

"An accident!" persisted the half-breed. "You could not do it again though your very life depended upon it!"

Bronze Jack laughed.

"Keep out of my path, young man, or I may be under the disagreeable necessity of convincing you that with the revolver I can play more tricks than one."

"Listen!" cried Mustang John, in a voice hoarse with suppressed passion, and, despite the menacing revolver of the other, he came a few steps nearer; "one of us must die! It is not possible that both of us can live and breathe this mountain air in peace; wide as is this prairie wilderness it is not big enough for both of us to exist in it."

Again the adventurer laughed as he closely regarded the passion-convulsed face of the half-breed, but he did not drop the muzzle of the revolver, but still kept it at the level ready for use.

"If that is really the case, if what you say is the truth, why then the quicker you pick out your coffin and prepare to get into it the better, for I tell you frankly, I've no idea of dying yet, for there is a good deal of work before me in this world that I want to accomplish."

"Fortune favored you the last time we met, but you may not be so lucky the next!"

"Fortune had nothing whatever to do with it!" Bronze Jack exclaimed, bluntly. "It was my superior skill which gave me the advantage, and that selfsame skill will serve me just as well when next we stand opposed in deadly strife."

"And that will be before we part this night!" the half-breed cried, evidently boiling over, as it were, with anger.

The adventurer knitted his brows, and he gazed curiously at the dark face of the Gold-Hunter, now so resolute in its expression.

"Well, really you puzzle me!" he exclaimed, after quite a long pause. "What on earth have I ever done to you that you should seek my life with such a deadly hatred?"

"Never mind that! That is my affair; the quarrel between us can only be settled by the death of one or both of us."

"Oh, I shall have to kill you, I see that," and Bronze Jack rose slowly to his feet as he made the remark, which he uttered in the most careless manner.

The Red Gold-Hunter chief was nettled by the tone.

"Take care!" he warned; "look well to yourself this time, for I am hungry for your blood!"

"Well, a willful man must have his own way, and since you are determined I won't balk you."

"Now, and on this spot!" demanded Mustang John.

"It is as good as any; use the weapons we have?"

"Yes, our revolvers first, and then our knives."

Bronze Jack laughed—that peculiar mocking laugh which grated on the ear.

"We'll never come to knives, my buck," he said, "unless another miracle is vouchsafed you, and I reckon miracles don't work worth a cent, nowadays."

"Oh, we can't all better after it is over!" the half-breed replied, too full of fury to be at all intimidated. "But, perhaps I am too quick for you—perhaps there is some one in the camp yonder—in Big Walnut—which you would like to say a parting word to, in case the chance of war goes against you?"

A quiet smile was upon the adventurer's face as he replied:

"Not a soul in Big Walnut Camp that I care to say a word to, whether I live or die."

"If not in Big Walnut Camp then in the fort upon the hillside that overlooks the town?" persisted the half-breed.

"Why should you think so?"

"Oh, my ears have not been worthless during the past four and twenty hours. I know of the great risk that the beautiful white girl ran to rescue you and your men out of the snare in which Manga Colorado and his Apaches held you and your followers. I overheard a conversation between the captain and his sister in which he bluntly charged her with being infatuated with you; and it is the truth, too, or else she never would have donned her brother's uniform and personated him in order to rescue you from the certain death that awaited you."

During this speech a light broke in upon the mind of the adventurer; all at once he comprehended the reason why Mustang John sought his life so eagerly. The half-breed fancied that the superb Cleopatra Dinwiddie loved him, and for that priceless boon, the love of such a woman, he must pay dear—that is, if Mustang John was skillful enough to carry out the pur-

pose he had in view, but the adventurer doubted this, most thoroughly.

"Oh, this is idle talk!" he exclaimed, impatiently. "Neither you nor I have aught to do with that lady. You fight me because you hate me, and I fight you because you are eaten up by a rash, overweening confidence, that needs restriction. You seek my life, but I do not seek yours, for it is of no value to me. I do not intend to kill you, but to teach you a lesson which you will remember to your dying day."

Both tone and words irritated the half-breed almost to madness.

"I do not ask for any mercy—for any consideration at your hands, and I give you fair warning to look well to yourself, for I will bring you so close to death, that even if its cold arms do not clasp you, their blighting influence you shall feel even to the marrow of your bones. This woman loves you, but that love shall never bring you one single moment of bliss; you are doomed to fall by my hand in this fight to-night; I am sure of it as though I now saw you lying still and motionless before me!"

"These sure things are the very deuce to bet on sometimes," Jack observed, in the most matter-of-fact way in the world, much to the rage of the other, who could not at all comprehend the wonderful calmness of the man. "I've lost a heap of money in my time betting on sure things, and that is the reason why I don't take any stock in this leetle game of yours," Jack continued.

The contrast between the two was really wonderful. Red Gold-Hunter was fairly wild with passion—trembled with excitement; the adventurer, on the contrary, was as cool as a block of ice and as calm as a marble statue.

"Come! come! we lose time!" the half-breed cried.

"Hold on a moment," Jack exclaimed, "you have been kind enough to explain your programme to me, so now, just listen to mine. I shall not take your life, although it will be mine to take the very moment we face each other in the field, but I'm going to put a mark upon you, so that in the dim and uncertain future I shall be able to recognize you, no matter how much your features may alter, nor how cunning and elaborate the disguise which you may assume, and after that is done, since you seem to be wild and bent on mischief, I shall 'crease' your head again and so disable you!"

A strange look—half wonder, half fear, passed rapidly over the face of the half-breed as Jack explained his plan. It was as if the Red Gold Hunter had asked himself, if it was likely that the other could carry out his idea, and had received assurance that he could; but speedily Mustang John was himself again.

"Are you ready?" he demanded; "if so, at once to business, and Heaven have mercy on our souls!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

JACK KEEPS HIS WORD.

"SINCE you are so anxious to begin, to it at once, then!" the adventurer exclaimed. "March off with you, and when you are ready, turn, and I will understand that it is the signal for the fun to begin."

The half-breed contracted his brows and hesitated.

"Well, what's the matter now?" Jack asked; "you were in a terrible hurry, a moment ago, but you don't seem so anxious."

"What assurance have I that, when I turn my back, you will not fire at me?" the Red Gold-Hunter demanded.

Jack could not help laughing.

"What a suspicious mortal you are!" he cried. "What assurance have you now that I will not 'plug' you without giving you any chance for your life? My revolver is out and at the level—a self-cocker, too, only requiring a single pull to raise the hammer and dispatch the ball. Why your life has been completely at my mercy ever since you came within fifty feet of me."

"It is not so!" John Mustang declared, fiercely. "It is all a lie, this boasted skill; you are not a medicine-man to be able to tell with exact certainty the mark which you will hit every time you fire your weapon."

"My noble young half-and-half, before you get through with me you will find that I am the biggest medicine-man with the pistol that ever was seen up in these diggings. Why, you have already had a proof of my skill and you ought to be satisfied."

"An accident! You cannot do it again—it is not possible," averred the Red Gold-Hunter.

"I'd like to bet you a trifle that within the next ten minutes you will change your mind in regard to that," the adventurer replied; "that is, unless I have scared you already and you back out of the fight."

"I will never give up until either you or I are cold in death!" the other persisted, hotly.

"Well, I don't intend that you shall kill me and I haven't the slightest intention of killing you," Jack retorted. "And since you have forced this quarrel on me I intend to have a little sport at your expense. As I told you, I am going to mark you—mark you so that when any one sees you they will be able to know you

again, no matter how you may disguise yourself!"

The face of the half-breed presented a curious study just at this moment; doubt, rage and fear were strangely blended, but with a violent effort John Mustang roused himself for the fight.

"We have talked enough!" he cried; "now for work!" And with the word he turned upon his heel and walked away.

"It is fated that I must set my mark upon this strange compound of humanity," Jack muttered to himself, as the other marched off, "and, since fate wills it, why should I seek to evade the responsibility? But, hang me if I can understand why things should be as they are."

The adventurer loosened the other revolver from the strap that held it to the belt and drew it forth.

No need to examine "the tools;" they were both in perfect order and were always kept so, for, woe to the unlucky plainsman who suffered himself to be taken at a disadvantage with his tools out of order, and no man knew this better than Bronze Jack.

A good two hundred yards the Red Gold-Hunter went and then he turned about and faced his antagonist. From his belt he drew his revolvers, and clutching one in each hand, first raising the hammers, came slowly toward the plainsman.

Bronze Jack had stepped forth from the shadow of the log shanty, and, standing right where the broad beams of the silver moon could fall full upon him, awaited the near approach of his foe. His hands he carried low down, at the level of his waist, and altogether he appeared so cool and unconcerned that a looker-on, unacquainted with the events that had previously transpired, would never have taken him to be one of the principals of a fight which was to be fought out to the bitter end.

John Mustang came slowly on, a grave expression upon his face and evidently fully aware of the difficult nature of the task which he had taken upon himself, but from the stern look in his eyes, and the determined compression of his mouth, it was plain that he was resolved to carry out the matter to the end. Even death itself had no terrors for his soul.

The adventurer stood as motionless as a statue until Mustang John got within about one hundred yards of him, and then, quick as a flash, up went Bronze Jack's left arm as a rest, and he leveled the revolver which he held in his right hand over the left arm.

The suddenness of the unexpected movement took the half-breed by surprise, and knowing the deadly skill of the adventurer with the revolver he naturally imagined that Bronze Jack was taking sure aim at him, and that, if he allowed him time, his death was certain; therefore, in order to disconcert his foe, he took rapid aim and fired at Jack, first with the right-hand revolver and then with the other.

As was only natural under the circumstances, both shots went wide of the mark, and Bronze Jack, refraining from firing, but still taking aim, laughed loudly in utter scorn.

"Oho!" he cried; "if you cannot do better than that, there won't be much chance for you in this little affair. Two shots already wasted! Look out when I commence, for I promise you that I won't waste many!"

The Red Gold-Hunter had come to an abrupt halt upon beholding the unfortunate result of his attempt. His eyes sparkled with rage.

"Do you bear a charmed life?" he shouted, an accent of despair in his tone. "Is your 'medicine' so great that you cannot be killed?"

"Not by you, nor by any of your kith and kin, be they red or white!" Jack replied, tauntingly.

"We shall see!" the half-breed exclaimed, in desperation, and he leveled his right-hand weapon with careful deliberation full at the heart of his adversary; but Bronze Jack, knowing that not one marksman out of a thousand was worth anything with the revolver at the distance of three hundred feet, which was about the space that separated the two, again laughed tauntingly and bade his foe blaze away.

Mustang John obeyed the command, and again the carefully-aimed bullet went wide of the man at whom it was directed.

"Why don't you fire?" cried the half-breed, in angry disgust; "are you only playing with my life?"

"You are too far off," Jack responded, quietly. "I call myself a very king of the revolver, and yet I should hesitate to bet much gold-dust that I could hit you at this distance. My game is to let you waste all your shots popping away at me, and then, when your revolver is empty, and you are practically disarmed and at my mercy, I will go for you."

The half-breed ground his teeth together in rage as he listened to this cool explanation of the intentions of the adventurer, and that Bronze Jack had spoken frankly he did not doubt for an instant.

"Oh, I must kill you!" he hissed, in his hot anger—an anger not unmixed with the desperation of despair.

"Come on, then! You'll never be able to

harm unless you come closer!" Bronze Jack answered. "This fight is all a farce as long as you remain at that distance, and the moment you get within easy range I'll let you know by opening fire!"

Now this was decidedly cool, and it exasperated the half-breed to the highest degree.

Mustang John remained motionless for a moment or two; his breath came thick and hard, and then, all of a sudden, yielding to the wild passion which surged through his veins, he cried aloud:

"Death to one of us!" and dashed forward at the top of his speed.

Bronze Jack awaited the onset as coolly as though he was a man of bronze, rather than a reckless, desperate fellow; but he was shrewdly calculating the distance, and when the half-breed got fairly within range there came a little puff of white smoke from the muzzle of the revolver, followed by a sharp report.

Again the wondrous skill of the man stood his friend, for, with a cry of pain, John Mustang halted and clapped his hand to the side of his head.

He was hit!

The blood was streaming from his ear. True to his word, Bronze Jack had marked him by sending a bullet through the lobe!

"I reckon that you won't get rid of that sign of mine in a hurry!" the adventurer cried.

With a cry of despair the half-breed leveled his revolver at the plainsman, but before he could pull the trigger the pistol of the white spoke again.

A duel with such a man, by any ordinary antagonist, was like a greenhorn playing cards with a professional sharper; there was not one chance in ten thousand for his success.

With a howl Mustang John threw up his hands and tumbled forward on his face.

The plainsman had "creased" him, exactly as he had said he would.

When the half-breed woke to consciousness, which, after some little time, he did, he was alone. The adventurer had disdained to profit by his victory.

CHAPTER XXX.

WHITE AND RED.

AFTER the interview between the Apache chief and the settlers in which the wily Indian had managed to escape from the extremely unpleasant position in which he had been placed in such a dexterous manner, Captain Dinwiddie escorted the Indian girl to the fort and at once proceeded to introduce her to his sister, under whose care he intended to place the girl while she remained at the fort.

Chito Colorado was no stranger by reputation to the white lady, and it was with considerable curiosity that Cleopatra surveyed the famous Apache Flower.

The Indian girl, with her blanket tightly wrapped around her head, after the savage fashion, and her eyes bent modestly to the ground, endured the inspection with true Indian calmness.

The white lady appeared puzzled at the result of her scrutiny. Although to her knowledge, she had never seen the Indian girl before, yet her features seemed strangely familiar to her.

Dinwiddie, who was not particularly observing by nature, never noticed the impression produced upon his sister by the face of the Indian girl.

In brief terms he introduced the maid and explained the reason for her presence in the fort.

"This is Chito, daughter of the great chief of the Apaches, Manga Colorado," he said. "She will be our guest for a while and dwell here in the fort under our protection. Her father has lately made a treaty of peace with us, but the settlers doubted that he would be able to restrain the young men of his tribe from acts of violence, so the chief gave up his daughter to my care as a hostage for his good intentions. You must see, Cleopatra, that she is made comfortable while she remains with us."

"Certainly; I will attend to her wants; but, it is strange the impression that has taken possession of me. I think I have seen Miss Chito before."

Dinwiddie, surprised, looked inquiringly at the Indian girl, but she shook her head.

"Chito no see white squaw before," she said, speaking very thick, and with a most decided Indian intonation.

"I am sure that I have seen you somewhere before!" Cleopatra persisted, surveying the girl with a puzzled expression upon her face, "and very recently too."

Again the girl shook her head.

"You are mistaken," Dinwiddie declared, "it is not possible, for I know that Miss Chito here has not been near the camp since your arrival."

Woman-like, Cleopatra was not convinced, but as she was not able to state when and where she had encountered the girl, she held her peace.

"My sister will see that you do not want for anything," the officer continued. "You will be able to make room for her, Cleopatra."

"Oh, yes; this room is at her service," and

the girl opened a door which led into an apartment situated next to her own.

"Chito's heart is full of gratitude to her white friends," said the Indian girl, at once proceeding to take possession of the room and closing the door after her.

Cleopatra immediately advanced to her brother and laid her hand impressively upon his arm.

"Brother!" she exclaimed, "this girl is dangerous!" Her tone was low, but her manner full of nervous anxiety as she made the declaration.

Dinwiddie looked at her in surprise.

"Why, Cleopatra, what do you mean? What idea have you got into your head?"

"This girl means mischief! I can read it in her eyes." The lady was terribly in earnest, but Dinwiddie only laughed.

"What foolish ideas you women do become possessed of!" he exclaimed. "What on earth has prejudiced you against the girl?"

"I am not prejudiced against her. She means evil; I am sure of it, and she is no stranger to me, either; I have seen her before, I am positive, although I cannot tell where, nor recall the circumstances under which we met."

"This is all an idle fancy!" Dinwiddie replied, impatiently. "I do not think it possible that you have ever met the girl before; she says that you have not, and these Indians have long memories and keen recollection of faces."

"But she may have some object in her denial!"

"What object?" the brother demanded, more and more impatient. "Cleopatra, I really believe that you are taking leave of your senses. This outrageous exploit of yours in disguising yourself in my uniform and leading the troops to the rescue of this desperado, who calls himself Bronze Jack, is something that is utterly impossible for me to understand, and now comes this mad idea of yours in regard to this Indian girl. As for the first affair the more I reflect upon the matter the more it appears to me that you must be fascinated by that dare-devil adventurer to run such a risk for him."

The lady flushed crimson to her very temples and angry indignation flashed from her superb eyes.

"You forget yourself, Bernard Dinwiddie!" she exclaimed, hotly; "you forget to whom you are speaking! It was to save *your* reputation from the blackening stain of cowardice, that I ventured, as few women would dare to venture, even for the man they love! You, the commander of this post, forgot *your* duty! You allowed the appeal for help to reach your ears and coldly refused to lend the aid that helpless men, surrounded by brutal savages, thirsting for their blood, eagerly called for!"

"My actions be upon my own head!" he retorted. "I do not ask you, nor any one else, to sit in judgment upon me. This eager seeker after gold is no friend of mine, and I know full well that he will do all in his power to injure me; therefore, if he had met his fate at the hands of the Apaches, it would have been all the better for me."

The girl looked at the man in ill-disguised contempt.

"Bernard Dinwiddie, I never expected to listen to such words from your lips!" she exclaimed.

"The truth should be spoken at all times!" he retorted! "But, enough of this! I am tired of bandying words with you, nor do I think that I am required to explain my actions for your satisfaction. It is enough that I know what I am about." And with this declaration, delivered in an extremely offensive manner, the officer quitted the apartment.

Cleopatra was amazed; she knew that her brother was weak in some respects, and grasping in others, but she had no idea that he could be so steadfast in the wrong.

Hardly had the door closed behind the captain, when the Indian girl came into the room, and Cleopatra at once guessed that she had listened and overheard the conversation.

Chito came straight up to the white lady and looked her steadily in the eye.

There was open menace in the savage maid's manner, and Cleopatra at once resented it.

"Bronze Jack is the white squaw's lover, eh?" Chito exclaimed, in an exasperating tone.

"What is that to you?" Cleopatra demanded, indignantly. "What is it your business whether I have one lover or fifty?"

"Chito not care if you have five hundred lovers, so that not one of the five hundred be Bronze Jack!"

There was no mistaking the meaning of this speech, and the white lady understood at once the motive that animated the girl.

"So, Bronze Jack is *your* lover, eh?" she queried.

"The great white chief once saved the Apache girl from the claws and teeth of the angry mountain bear, and she belongs to him, whenever he chooses to claim her."

"And if he doesn't choose to claim you at all?" the white girl suggested, in a sarcastic tone.

The eyes of the Indian girl, black as jet beads, fairly flashed fire, and she approached a step nearer to Cleopatra as she spoke.

"While Chito Colorado lives the white chief

shall never choose any other squaw!" she cried.

"Oh! He must choose you or death?" and the girl's lip curled as she uttered the speech.

"Yes; the Apache girl or death!" Chito replied, firmly.

"You ought to explain your position to him, so that he will understand what is before him!" Cleopatra exclaimed, in scorn.

"Chito talks to you! She tells you what is in her mind. You try to take the white chief from her. Beware! Chito will strike a knife to your heart, as readily as to open and shut her hand, if you cross her path!"

The white lady did not recoil at all at this threat, for she was made of sterner stuff than the majority of womankind.

"Two words to that!" she answered, defiantly. "I am no child to be frightened by threats. I care not for this man of whom you speak, but this I do say, if I cared for him, neither you nor all the rest of your Apache nation could make me give him up. And, as to your threats, perhaps the day will come when you will learn that I can handle a weapon as well as you!" And, with this defiance, Cleopatra swept proudly from the apartment.

The Indian girl remained motionless for a moment, gazing after her in anger; then, suddenly recovering the use of her tongue, she cried:

"You must die—die by my hand, for the squaw of Bronze Jack you shall never be!"

Chito retired to her own apartment, and shortly afterward the captain called upon her.

He made a proposition, and waited for her answer.

"To-morrow night, when the moon is straight over the fort, come to me and I will speak!" she said.

CHAPTER XXXI.

PREPARING FOR THE FRAY.

NEARLY four-and-twenty hours from the time when the adventuring plainsman had so dexterously ended the duel between himself and the Red Gold-Hunter half-breed, by "creasing" the angry youth with a revolver ball and disabling him just as if he had been a wild mustang too speedy to be outfooted by a common steed—nearly four-and-twenty hours and the big, red moon was rising slowly in the heavens, shining like a ball of fire.

Luna, with her calm, mild gaze, beamed down alike on the mining camp, on the little stockade fort, perched upon the hillside, on the placid waters of the "Clear Fork," and on the uninhabited wilderness that belted in the white settlement.

Rarely was it that the old round moon lighted up the path or shone down upon the faces of many men at such an hour.

In the town and within the precincts of the fort there was evidence enough of human life, but on the lonely hillsides, without the boundaries of Big Walnut Camp, with the exception of now and then a stray wanderer straggling into the town along some one of the narrow trails that led into the mountain gulches through the rents in the hilly chain that encircled the town, the orb of night shone not on the face of a mortal.

But at the hour of which we write, before the night was fairly old—before the moon was fairly up, one of the glens to the north of the mining settlement, fairly swarmed with men.

Not white men—no honest miners, no keen Jew traders, nor the uniformed boys of Uncle Sam, but a host of dusky red braves, the sons of the wilderness, richly tricked out in all the savage finery dear to the heart of the red warrior.

Two hundred warriors at least were in the little valley, through which ran a clear mountain stream that, cutting its way through the foot-hills below, went to swell the waters of the river by whose side the white men had built their town and perched their fort.

Apaches all, these dusky fighting-men, the Colorado river band, old Manga Colorado's picked warriors. And every man, too, that the tribe could muster was in the field, and on mischief bent.

One posted in the Indian fashions could have told this at a glance, for each and every red-skin was gaily decked with war-paint, nearly all naked to the waist, and all on foot, and this signified that the expedition was a secret one, and that a surprise was intended.

Everything had been arranged in the most careful manner. The dusky braves lolled upon the grass in careless ease, but sentinels were posted on every side—outlying pickets, whose duty it was to guard against a surprise, although apart from the chance of some belated wayfarer journeying to the town, stumbling upon the party, there was little danger of interruption.

By a little clump of pines on one side of the valley sat the old chief, Manga Colorado, surrounded by a circle of noted warriors.

The Indians were eagerly surveying the moon and evidently calculating the flight of time.

It was plain that they were expecting some one or something, and that the time for the arrival had past.

Suddenly there rose on the air, coming from the north-east, the mournful hoot of an owl.

The faces of the dusky warriors instantly brightened up.

"Wah, it is time!" exclaimed the old chief. "For wild horses they have taken much time on the march."

And then, in a few minutes, gliding into the little valley, like so many specters, with noiseless steps, from the shelter of the wooded hills to the north, came a file of red braves.

Each and every man was armed to the teeth—each and every man wore the gay war-paint that told of blood and slaughter.

The new-comers numbered about a hundred men, all told, the Wild Horse band of Apaches from the great plains to the north-east.

The chief saluted Manga and reported that he had a hundred warriors with him.

"Let your braves rest," said the old chief; "there are two more bands to come yet."

And within twenty minutes the owl-cries rising in melancholy discord on the air from the east and from the west announced the arrival of the other detachments.

Some eighty men in one, a hundred odd in the other, so that the total force now subject to old Manga's commands amounted to about five hundred men.

A small army, and great indeed must be the promise of the prize that had attracted so many of the dusky braves together, for no ordinary raid would have answered.

And the prize that the old Apache chief had held forth as a bait when he had craved the assistance of his kindred bands was indeed a rich one, being no less than the plunder of Big Walnut Camp.

A mighty man of war was the old Apache chief, although nothing but a barbarian, and totally unread in the books that treat of the science of destruction. He had formed a deep and cunning plan whereby he thought he could surprise the fort, butcher the troops, and then turn his attention to the mining town.

Big Walnut Camp had been as a thorn in the sides of the Indians ever since its establishment, and although at first the Apaches had believed it would be only a temporary affair, and that, after the gold deposits of the creek had been exhausted—which they had believed would not take long—the intruding white men would then pull up stakes and go elsewhere; but the gold deposits had proved richer and more extensive than the Indians had calculated upon; some rich leads had been struck, too, in the neighboring gulches, and instead of the town dwindling away, as they had confidently expected, to their dismay they saw it was growing larger and larger, and the establishment of the fort upon the hillside, capped the climax, so to speak.

Manga Colorado had pondered long and thoughtfully over the circumstance, and after weighty deliberation had made up his mind to exterminate the settlement, no matter how great the cost.

The intimacy which had sprung up between himself and the commander of the fort, owing to Dinwiddie's insane desire to learn of the Indians something of their secret mines in the mountains—from the first settlement of Arizona tradition has reported that there were extremely rich mines in the mountains, known only to the savages, and that if any one could succeed in getting an Indian to conduct him to one of these treasure lodes, a man might carry away a fortune in his pockets in pure nuggets—and also from the reckless passion which he had for the chief's daughter, the fair tigress, Chito, old Manga determined to turn to his advantage.

So far all had worked well; he had succeeded in installing his daughter within the fort, and, knowing her as he did, the old chief understood that there was not a warrior in his tribe who could be of more service to him inside the fort than his quick-witted, desperate-hearted Chito.

All was progressing smoothly: the warriors had arrived ready for action, five hundred of the best braves that the western wilderness could boast! There were not over two hundred men in the town and fort combined, so that the Indians were more than two to one: besides, Manga calculated the advantage of the surprise, planning the attack as he had to take place in the "dead waste and middle of the night."

Higher and higher rose the moon: more and more earnest grew the watch of the chief as the time for action drew near.

"When the "silver queen of night" hung directly over their heads, Manga, rising, gave the word to advance.

As a soldier, the Indian warrior is unexcelled; no troops this world has ever seen can compare with the red-men on the march, for celerity of action.

Like a huge black serpent the line wound down the valley, and through the narrow defile below, which led to the hillside just above the fort.

Noiseless as so many ghosts, newly sprung from untimely graves—no clash of weapons, no careless footfall to betray the advance—the Indian line stole onward, taking advantage of every little clump of timber to screen their approach from observation.

Wonderful to relate, the five hundred men

concealed their approach as completely as though the entire force did not number a dozen.

The midnight hour was at hand. Hardly a light shone from the sleeping town of Big Walnut Camp down in the valley, below the fort.

Even the fortified post seemed wrapped in slumber; no sentinel paced along by the stockade wall, keeping vigilant watch for the red foe, now so near.

The garrison appeared to be open to attack.

When he arrived within five hundred paces of the objective point, Manga halted his force and bade them deploy so as to completely surround the fort, and then gave orders that at the old Indian signal, the owl hoot, each warrior should advance and scale the wall.

Everything was so quiet the suspicious old savage was inclined to suspect that something had happened to betray his design, and that the white-skins were prepared to give him a warm reception.

It was too late to retreat, now; there was nothing left but to carry out the plan although disaster followed.

Manga, at the head of a dozen of his best men, stole up to the gate. It opened, suddenly, just as the chief reached it, and the uniform of Captain Dinwiddie met his astonished eyes.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A STRANGE WOOING.

JUST about the time that the old red chief Manga Colorado was mustering his chosen men in the little valley adjacent to the mining camp, preparatory to a descent upon the town, Captain Bernard Dinwiddie sat in his quarters, his feet elevated upon a table, lolling back in his chair in an extremely comfortable way, and enjoying the flavor of a remarkably fine cigar, for the captain was decidedly epicurean in his tastes.

Dinwiddie felt at peace with himself and all the world, for the prospect before him was an extremely pleasant one.

Chito, the Apache Flower, a most beautiful girl, despite her masculine look, was safely in his hands, a pledge of good faith on the part of the old Indian chieftain.

The officer, with that peculiar odd fancy that at times seizes upon the best and wisest of mankind when a woman is concerned, had taken a strange liking to the girl. He wanted her for his squaw; he, the elegant, carefully educated gentleman, desired to possess the wild, savage Apache beauty.

And then, too, apart from his fanciful passion for the girl, the captain had another object in view. By birth Dinwiddie came of an old Virginian family, one of the line that, in the old time, reigned like princes over ten thousand broad acres, who spent money like water, and who gave little heed to the future, and it was this careless unthrift on the part of his father that had reduced the good old Dinwiddie family to almost absolute poverty.

Of the old line only the brother and sister remained, but their ancestral estate was so covered by mortgages that it was doubtful, should the creditors press their claims, if there would be anything left after their just demands and the oppressive legal expenses were satisfied.

One absorbing desire, then, had the captain—a desire which dwelt with him both by day and night, and which, as years rolled on, grew stronger and stronger, and that was to accumulate money enough not only to pay off the family debts, but to assume a position in the world such as the head of the old house of Dinwiddie had always occupied.

Of course the outlook for the accomplishment of the purpose was not brilliant. The captain managed to live upon his official pay and that was all. Cleopatra was no burden to him or else he would have found it extremely difficult to get on at all. She, luckily, had a small income sufficient for her support, the gift of a deceased uncle, who had not made "ducks" and "drakes" of his money like all the rest of his family.

Dinwiddie knew well enough that unless he managed by such lucky chance to stumble upon a fortune his wishes could never be realized.

But, since he had been stationed in the Western wilderness, he had seen so many men by lucky strokes of fortune spring at a single bound from poverty to wealth, that he began to believe there might be a chance for him.

The stories of the hidden mines of the Apaches had made a deep impression upon him, and he firmly believed that there was some foundation for the tales, and this was one reason why he was so anxious to get possession of the Indian girl. Once she was his squaw he felt satisfied that he could persuade her to reveal to him the secrets of her tribe.

And Dinwiddie, puffing away at his cigar in dreamy meditation, waiting impatiently for the time to come when he should call upon the savage beauty, like many another calculating man put his thoughts into words:

"The old chief thinks that it would be a good thing for him," he muttered, "and of course the girl knows what is in store for her or else she would not have come. Manga is a cool and cunning old rascal, but, smart as he is, I think that in this matter I will get the best of the bar-

gain. For six months or so I can stand the girl well enough, and during that time I'm not the man I think I am if I don't worm the secret of some one of these hidden gold mines out of her, and when I once get my fingers on the gold, why then, the girl can go to the deuce as soon as she pleases. It won't be difficult to get rid of her. Once let me find myself rich, then this wild Western land won't hold me long, nor the service of Uncle Sam. I suppose that Cleopatra will kick up a deuce of a row when I take up with this girl, but I can't help that. That little episode of hers in regard to the Gold-Hunter will be apt, though, to keep her more quiet than she would have been. I can't very well explain my plans to her, for she has some very peculiar notions about honesty—keeping faith and making good her word. When the game is won, though, I reckon that she will bring herself to share in the spoils unless she takes it into her head to marry this Bronze Jack, although I hardly think that she will go as far that."

The captain came to the end of his cigar and his meditations at the same time; so, flinging the remains of the "weed" away he rose and approached the window.

The moon hung high in the heavens right over his head. The time for the interview had come.

"Now for my wooing!" he exclaimed. "By George! if any one had told me a year ago that, within twelve months, I would be suing at the feet of a she red-skin, entreating her to become my squaw, I would have laughed the idea to scorn; but there's no telling, in this world, what we may come to."

Dinwiddie threw his cloak around him, adjusted his hat and stepped forth into the open air.

So bright the moon that all was as light as by day. The sentinel without the stockade wall was pacing with measured steps up and down his beat before the gateway of the fort, and the shining end of his bayonet, gleaming silver in the moonlight, could be plainly distinguished above the top of the wall.

Not a sound was in the air, except the measured tramp of the soldier keeping watch and ward.

The sounds of mirth and revelry which, earlier in the night, had come from the lively denizens of the mining camp, were absent now. The midnight hour being close at hand the town was wrapped in slumber's chain.

"Now for my beauty!" the captain murmured, as he advanced toward the door of the girl's apartment, through the curtained window of which shone a dim light, thus plainly revealing that the Apache Flower waited for the coming of her lord and master. "This night makes her mine," he continued, "and then for the secret of these hidden gold deposits, the beacon-light that lured Bronze Jack and his adventurers upon their dangerous way."

Advancing to the door the captain tapped upon it softly.

The girl was apparently upon the watch, for the door was opened almost immediately and the tall form of the Indian girl appeared.

"Do not fear, Chito, it is I!" Dinwiddie said, cautiously.

"Oh, I am not afraid; the heart of Chito, the daughter of the wild Apache race, knows not what it is to feel the taint of fear."

"It is the time that you appointed."

The Indian maid cast her eyes upward; the moon indeed did hang directly over their heads.

"Enter and Chito will speak," replied the girl, stepping back from the threshold so that he could enter.

The heart of the officer beat high with exultation; the moment of his triumph seemed near at hand.

He glanced around him; not a soul of the garrison seemed to be stirring, save the sentinel pacing his lonely beat without the stockade wall.

A single glance and then Dinwiddie, with the stealthy tread of the night-prowler, rather than the proud step of a successful lover, stole into the apartment, closing the door carefully behind.

There was a strange look upon the face of the Indian girl as she noticed his cautious glance before he entered, but, as he turned his head toward her again the look vanished, and the calm, stolid expression reappeared.

"Why does the great white chief look around him as though he feared that he was watched?" she asked. "Is he afraid that some one will see him come into the room of the woman who is to be his squaw?"

"Oh, no!" replied the captain, seating himself in a chair, and giving himself up to admiration for the stately beauty of the red maiden, for she was beautiful despite her masculine appearance. "But, no one knows, as yet, you know, that you are to be my squaw, and of course if any one saw me coming in here at this hour it would be apt to excite wonder. Tomorrow, when I introduce you to my men as my squaw, why, it will be all right."

"Chito is satisfied," answered the girl, in her quiet, impassive way, "but she thought that, maybe the white chief was ashamed of her, and it made her heart sad."

The words were plaintive enough, but there wasn't the least bit of it in her tone.

"Oh, no! I am proud of you, Chito!" he exclaimed. "It is not every white chief that can win the daughter of great Manga Colorado for his squaw. But you are satisfied to come and dwell in my wigwam? Your father did not force you to this step?"

The girl drew herself up proudly, and a flash of light came from her dark eyes.

"The man lives not, red or white, Manga Colorado or the greatest chief of the Apache nation, who can compel Chito Colorado to enter the wigwam of a chief whom she did not like!"

A regular tiger-cat, thought the officer, and in his soul he laughed when he reflected what a tool he intended to make of this proud, savage maiden to serve his own ambitious ends.

"You come, then, of your own free will?"

"Yes, else Chito would not have come at all!"

"And you are content to give yourself to me?"

"Take me! You are my chief!" and the girl cast down her dark eyes.

Dinwiddie rose, and with a single impulsive movement folded her to his heart, and the next moment a hollow groan escaped from his lips.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A BLOODY DEED.

LITTLE wonder that the hollow groan—the cry of mortal agony—was forced from the quivering lips of the captain. Even as he folded the girl to his heart, encircling the superb form in his strong arms, with a steady, deliberate hand and wondrous skill, as she pressed her lips to his, she dealt him a terrible blow in the back right at the spine with a razor-edged knife which she plucked from her girdle even as she embraced him.

The blow was mortal, and the stricken man never spake word after he received it.

A hollow groan, and that was all!

The life ebbed fast away, and almost before his clinging lips had parted from her own, the fell destroyer, grim death, had claimed his prey.

She held a lifeless form within her arms.

The plotter had been caught in his own trap; not for him was the warlike Apache maid—not for him the hidden secrets of the golden stores buried in the deep recesses of the wild Apache land.

His race was run—his career ended; he had fallen, not like a soldier should fall—in open, glorious fight, amid the red heat of battle, but like a craven cur by a woman's hand.

With dexterous movement, and a face as stolid as though her hand had not fell murder committed, the girl laid the lifeless form upon the floor, and then, stealing with cautious steps to the door, she opened it and peeped out. She was afraid that some restless, uneasy sleeper might have been awakened by the last despairing cry of her victim.

Fortune had favored her though, for all within the Camp slept soundly, and the agonizing groan of the death-stricken man had fallen upon no ears except her own.

With a self-satisfied look upon her dusky face, she closed the door and returned to her victim.

She removed his uniform and adjusted it upon her own person, cast his cloak over her shoulders and pulled his hat down over her eyes, and although in stature not so tall as the officer whom she had so artfully slain, yet she was a fair counterfeit of him, and likely to deceive except on near inspection.

And, thus attired, stepping forth from the house with the bold, swinging step of a man, it would have been a keen observer indeed who, in such a disguise, would have been able to recognize the Apache Flower, Chito Colorado.

This wild demon was not satisfied with the blood that she had already shed but craved for more; but, as she halted by the door, as though to reflect upon the next step to be taken, a sudden thought occurred to her. The captain of the post had succumbed to her keen stroke, but she had neglected to secure the gory trophy of victory so dear to the heart of the savage: the "scalp" of Dinwiddie was still in its place!

With firm purpose she retraced her steps, entered the room, secured the scalp of the man whom she had sent so suddenly and without warning to his long home, and then, inflexible as the very angel of death itself, she proceeded to carry out the plan for which she had deemed it necessary to disguise herself in the uniform of the dead officer.

She strolled across the parade-ground, keeping a careful watch to see if she was observed, but she was not; she opened the gate of the stockade, taking advantage of the sentinel's absence at the end of his beat, and reclining carelessly against the side of the portal, waited for the sentry's return.

The soldier had seen the gate open and the captain, as he supposed, appear; and so excellent was the assumption of this female demon, aided as it was by the shadow cast by the stockade wall, that the sentinel was completely deceived and never, even for an instant, doubt-

ed that it was Captain Dinwiddie who leaned against the door-post.

As the soldier came marching back the supposed officer beckoned for him to approach.

The man, believing that the other had some communication to deliver, came up instantly, and when within a yard or so of the gate halted and saluted.

This was the opportunity which the disguised red-skin sought.

Still in her hand was the keen-edged knife, yet reeking in the blood of the slain Dinwiddie, and, as the sentinel, totally devoid of all suspicion, halted before her, with a bound like the hungry tiger leaping at his prey she sprung upon him.

The razor-edged knife glittered for a moment in the moonlight and then was driven up to the hilt in the breast of the soldier, who, taken entirely by surprise, had no chance to offer resistance to the deadly stroke.

So skillfully delivered was the blow, so determined the stroke, so great the muscular force that impelled the knife that the keen steel sapped the life of the hapless sentry at once.

He staggered back with a cry of anguish.

"Oh, my God!" he exclaimed, dropping his gun and throwing up his arms in an agony of pain.

Fearing lest the stricken man should give an alarm, and so arouse the sleeping garrison, with an angry bound the red-skin followed up the advantage which she had so deftly won.

A dozen times at least she drove the bloody knife clear up to the hilt in the breast of the unfortunate man, each stab large and deadly enough to let out a life.

The sentry stumbled backward, impelled by the fierce attack, fell, and then expired without a groan.

Down by his side knelt the red-skin, and with eager ears she listened. She feared lest the noise of the struggle might have awakened some one within the garrison.

But on this fatal night it seemed as if some dark, malignant angel—some demon, hot with the desire for slaughter—watched over the bloody enterprise, for the last despairing cry of the death-stricken man did not alarm the sound sleepers of the fort.

A few minutes Chito remained in her watchful attitude, and then, satisfied that there was no cause for fear, she proceeded to dexterously add the scalp of the soldier to that of the captain.

Then raising the bleeding witness of her bloody work she carried it around the angle of the wall and concealed it in the tall grass. This deed performed, she stationed herself just inside the gate in anticipation of the approach of Manga Colorado and his warriors.

And so it happened that, when the Apaches stole up to the gate of the stockade, they were astonished at the appearance of what seemed to them to be the commander of the garrison.

Manga was prompt to act, and his long knife flashed up into the air ready to strike the soldier down.

But the girl at once checked the stroke.

"It is I—Chito!" she exclaimed, cautiously.

A grunt of admiration came from the lips of the old Apache, and the surrounding warriors re-echoed it.

"And the captain?" Manga questioned.

For answer the demon-like girl held up the gory scalp that she had torn from the head of the slain officer.

The old chief clutched it eagerly and surveyed it with a glance of pride. He recognized the shining locks which had once adorned the handsome head of the dashing captain, for Dinwiddie had always been something of a dandy in regard to his personal appearance.

"Wah! It is good!" Manga exclaimed, in a tone which plainly indicated that he was remarkably well pleased at the way in which matters had gone. "Chito no squaw," he continued, gravely addressing his warriors—"a great chief—as great as any in the Apache nation."

And the warriors solemnly shook their heads as much as to say that they fully coincided in the opinion promulgated by the old brave.

With a proud gesture the girl swung open the gate.

"Enter!" she exclaimed; "the white men are at your mercy!"

"And the white squaw?" the old red butcher asked, eagerly, as they stole through the portal; "the white squaw, where is she?"

"Yonder; I will show you."

"Death to all!" Manga exclaimed, cautiously to his warriors as they stole into the fort; "death to all! Slay and spare not, excepting the white squaw; she is for the wigwam of your chief!"

And so the word was passed throughout the host.

"Death to all but the white squaw!"

And to have given her to the cruel slaughter would have been a mercy rather than spare her for the dreadful fate to which the old chief had doomed her.

Cleopatra Dinwiddie—the bright, beautiful, refined Cleopatra, the squaw of the brutal, greasy, blood-stained old savage, his soul weight-

ed down by a hundred vile deeds, each one worse than the other!

Wonderfully successful had been the plans of the savages up to this point. If the old chief himself had had the entire directing of events, he could not have arranged matters more to his satisfaction than they had been; but now, for the first time, he was to meet a check.

The door of the girl's quarters was carefully locked. With all the natural fear of women, Cleopatra stoutly guarded the door of her apartment.

Manga tried the door carefully and as cautiously as the night-prowler on the search for prey, but the door opened not; then the old chief put his broad shoulder to it and endeavored to force it open, with violence and yet without noise.

But the door was stoutly framed, and though it creaked under the pressure yet it yielded not.

The chief hesitated; it would not do to burst in the door, for by so doing the sleeper would be most surely awakened. The surprise must come all together.

The attack was soon arranged. Chito, with a couple of brawny braves, was to burst in the door of the girl's apartment at the same moment that Manga and the rest sprung like tigers upon the unsuspecting sleeping soldiery.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE ATTACK.

THE particulars were soon arranged. The Indians scattered themselves around the fort, ready for the signal to commence the slaughter.

Within five minutes' time old Manga waved his hand, and then, high on the air rung the revengeful war-cry of the Apache warriors.

Into the quarters of the soldiers they burst and commenced a ferocious attack upon the sleeping men.

So complete was the surprise that the soldiers, springing in alarm from their beds, the next instant fell beneath the weapons of the savage foe, but even this complete slaughter took time, and some few of the men had an opportunity to grasp their weapons, and those who did so, bravely gave fight; but it was a hopeless struggle, and, although it cost the red-skins some of their best warriors, it was soon ended.

But the Indians had not succeeded to the extent which they had anticipated. They had hoped to slaughter the soldiers without alarming the town, so that they could also surprise the miners in their beds, but this, from the way in which matters went, was rendered impossible. Some of the soldiers had clutched their firearms, and some brisk shooting had taken place—quite enough to alarm the town below in the valley; and then, too, by one of those strange accidents which sometimes happen and no one can tell how or why they occur, the quarters took fire, and being composed of light inflammable stuff, burnt briskly, despite the efforts of the Indians to extinguish them. Not that the red-skins cared two straws about the buildings, but they did for the plunder which they contained, and sorely angry were the Apaches when they saw the devouring flames lick up the booty which they had intended to carry off to their mountain homes.

A complete success had been the surprise of the soldiers, but Chito had not succeeded so well in her task. At the signal given by old Manga the warriors who had been detailed to assist her in capturing the girl, put their shoulders to the door and attempted to burst it in, but the door was a stout one, and for a minute or two resisted their efforts, but, finally, it yielded, and as it gave way with a crash, torn from the hinges, into the apartment rushed the savages.

The girl was not there.

She had been alarmed by the attack, and the stubborn resistance that the door had offered had given her time to escape.

"Wah! she is gone!" cried one of the chieftains.

But Chito's quick eyes noted that the bed was all in disorder as though it had been occupied and the sleeper had been suddenly roused from slumber, and then a door at the other end of the room caught her eyes.

She rushed to it! It was locked and the key upon the outside. The truth flashed upon her at once. The girl, roused from her slumbers by the attempt to force the door, had at once realized that danger was at hand, and had improved the opportunity to escape that the resistance of the door had offered; and so calm and deliberate had been her movements that she had locked the door, through which she had fled, after her.

In obedience to Chito's command the braves forced the door.

As the red-skins had suspected, it led into the open air, and, right close at hand was a small shed wherein the spotted mustang was kept, and as the reds came through the door out from the shed rode Cleopatra.

She had cast a water-proof cloak over her night-robés, had had time to bridle and saddle her horse, and now, with a revolver in each hand, she was about to make a bold dash to escape from the terrible trap in which the inmates of the garrison had been caught.

The warriors who had accompanied Chito sprung forward to endeavor to detain the girl, but Chito stood still with staring eyes. The prospect of the girl's escape seemed to turn her into stone, so bitter was the hate she bore to the white beauty.

With a steady and determined hand Cleopatra fired at the red warriors who endeavored to intercept her.

In sportive moments the girl had practiced with the revolver, so that she had become quite an excellent shot, and the skill stood her friend now.

Two quick, snap shots she fired, and each time the bullet found its billet in the flesh of a red warrior.

Down went the red-skins stricken near to death by the girl's firm hand.

The way was clear for her escape, for the red-skins were all busy with the fighting soldiery, and not a dusky brave barred the way to the open gate of the stockade.

With firm-set lips and resolute purpose Cleopatra rode for the gate at the best speed of the spotted beast.

Another minute and she would have passed through the portal, safe for the present from all danger, and this fact seemed to waken Chito from her abstraction.

With desperate, bloodthirsty resolve she plucked a revolver from her belt and leveling it at the fleeing girl fired.

Cleopatra was right at the gate as the shot came.

Deadly, indeed, was the aim, for the girl, with a wild shriek, toppled over backward, and the spotted mustang, terribly alarmed by the sounds of the bloody conflict, passed through the gate riderless.

With a gloomy face Chito advanced to where the girl lay prostrate on the ground—her face upturned to the quiet, peaceful moon that seemed in wonder to look down upon this dreadful scene of mortal carnage.

The girl was dead—the ball had reached her heart and cut it in twain. Her long hair, simply arranged in a single braid, attracted Chito's attention. She stooped and with a single slash of her keen knife severed it.

"When I meet him, I will show this as a trophy!" she muttered to herself, as she rose to her feet. "No longer will she dispute with me for his love!" And then she took another look at the face of the dead girl, as calm and peaceful as though she was sleeping quietly in her bed, instead of just having passed through the mortal agony that precedes and accompanies the passage through Death's dark door.

"She is very beautiful, but she never carried the heart in her bosom that I bear in mine. She was never fitted to be his squaw, while I am. It is not possible that he likes her better than he does me; but if he did," she continued, defiantly, "what matters it now? She is dead and I live! He either becomes my chief or I will kill him as I have killed her and her pale-faced brother—the vulture that aspired to mate with the eagle."

By this time the conflict was about over, and the flames, gaining ground, luridly illuminated the scene.

Chito turned away from her victim and approached the group of Apaches wherein the old chief stood.

Manga was busily engaged in giving orders. He intended to instantly attack the mining camp, notwithstanding that the inhabitants had been alarmed by the fight in the fort and were naturally on the alert.

"The girl—the white squaw—where is she?" the old chief demanded, instantly.

"Yonder," and Chito pointed to the motionless mass upon the ground by the gate.

The chief's eyes flashed with rage.

"She is hurt!" he cried.

"Worse," responded Chito, bluntly; "she is dead!"

The rage of old Manga knew no bounds, and for a moment he swore most fluently in Apache, Spanish and English. One language did not contain "cuss" words enough to do justice to his feelings.

The girl listened in silence, gloomy and abstracted.

At last, his anger in some little measure eased by the explosion, he turned to Chito for an explanation.

"How comes it that she is dead—who killed her?" he demanded.

"I did," the girl replied, instantly.

Again the rage of the old chief, thus abruptly cheated of his prey—deprived of the beautiful white squaw after which his soul hungered—flamed forth; he raised his hand as though intending to strike the girl to his feet, but, savage, brutal monster as he was, there was a look in the dark eyes of Chito, who faced him unaided, that stayed his hand.

And well it was for Manga that he refrained from striking the girl, for in the present desparate mood of Chito's soul she was not in the humor to take a blow from any one, and if the old chief had not slain her with the stroke, she most assuredly would have used a weapon upon him in return.

"You are too rash—too eager for blood!" he

cried. "Do you not know that I had marked that girl for my squaw. I would rather that the great white chief himself had escaped than for her to fall."

"She would have escaped otherwise," Chito explained. "She managed to get to her horse, struck down two warriors by pistol-shots, and would have escaped had I not fired at her. You can see that she fell right in the doorway."

"Better that she had escaped," the old chief grunted, unable to conquer his disappointment. "She would have gone direct to the town, and I will take that, too, before another moon rises!"

The chief spoke confidently enough, but it was not such a sure thing as he thought, although the Indians did outnumber the miners five to one; but the Big Walnut men, warned of the savages' purpose, were on the alert, and knowing that naught but death or a hideous captivity awaited them in the event of a savage triumph, were preparing to sell their lives as dearly as possible.

Clearly Manga Colorado had no light task before him when he marshaled his warriors to attack Big Walnut Camp.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE ATTACK ON THE CAMP.

The slaughter of the unfortunate troopers, so completely taken by surprise, had only just whetted the appetites of the red warriors, and they thirsted for more blood, therefore the announcement of the old chief that he would immediately proceed to attack the town was received with general rejoicing.

But it was no light task that the savage braves had undertaken, as they speedily discovered, although flushed with their easy triumph over the garrison, they rushed to the assault of the town brimful of confidence.

But now they were not placed in opposition to men hastily roused from heavy slumber, ill-armed—for, in fact, many of the soldiers were armed only with Nature's weapons, not having time to grasp steel or gun.

The miners in the town who, as a general rule, slept with their weapons right at their sides, alarmed by the fight within the fort, had ample time to prepare for the fray, and there wasn't a man in the Camp who didn't understand the magnitude of the impending danger.

Manga Colorado had often boasted that some time he would come down from his mountain home and take the scalps of all the pale-face mud-diggers, as he contemptuously termed the miners; and now the Apache chief was about to be as good as his word.

Wonderfully successful had the red chief been, too, in his surprise of the fort, as the miners saw, for they understood, when they beheld the Indians in possession of the post, and could not discover any signs of the soldiers, that all the troops had fallen in the fight.

In an emergency like this such men as Bronze Jack and the old scout, Big Bill Williams, naturally came to the front.

The miners instinctively looked upon the two as being more capable of directing their movements in the impending fight than any other two men that Big Walnut Camp could boast.

At the first as the miners came rushing in hot haste from their shanties their first impulse was to hurry to the assistance of the troops, but Jack and Williams objected.

"It's no use, boys!" the adventurer exclaimed. "They're done for, and I doubt if there is a single man of them alive now. The Indians have managed to surprise them; as you can plainly see, the reds are in complete possession of the fort. Heaven knows I feel as bad about it as any man can, and I would do anything in reason to save the poor fellows, if there are any of them left, which I doubt, but the attempt would be only madness. We should fall an easy prey to the red devils. They have a regular army, seven or eight hundred warriors at the least!"

The night was so light that the miners could easily distinguish the dancing, yelling savages clustered around the fort, and their numbers appeared so great that it seemed as if Bronze Jack had underestimated the force, and that from a thousand to fifteen hundred red-skins were upon the hillside.

"Thicker'n fleas in a Greaser's blanket, boys!" Big Bill Williams yelled. "No use of our gwine for them; they'll come for us, soon enough!"

"And we can whip them, too!" Bronze Jack cried, in a most decided tone. "Whip them bad, no matter if old Manga has got two thousand warriors at his back, if you'll only be guided by me. We must stick to our shanties and plug the reds as they dash at them."

"That never was no Injun that lived yet that was worth a cent in tackling a man in a house!" Williams protested. "We'll flax 'em, boys, and send 'em howlin' like imps of sin!"

This resolute talk put new life into the miners; but not much time was allowed for deliberation, for the Indian chief as soon as possible led his followers to the attack and sack of the town.

The blazing buildings of the fort were throwing their flames high in the air as though ambitious to outshine the light of the moon as old Manga led his warriors down the hillside.

With all the rage and fierceness of the mountain torrent, leaping down its rocky bed, the Indians came,

Not a white man could they see—not a sound ascended from the town; the flames cracked and roared; the savages yelled, but not a single cry answered the defiance.

The silence was so complete that, at first, the old red-skin believed all in the town had fled in consternation.

But, from this dream he was destined to be rudely awakened.

The savages came rushing into the town, and then, high on the air, rose the voice of the old scout:

"Give 'em blazes, boys!"

At once the settlers opened fire. From every house came a sheet of flames, and in the center of every little lurid puff was a death-dealing ball.

It was a terrible fire and did terrible execution; red-skin after red-skin dropped in his tracks; the savage yell of defiance which was pealing from the throat changed into the hollow groan that tells of mortal pain.

The Apaches were caught in a trap, and the perate and infuriated by the slaughter, they endeavored to

break open the doors of some of the shanties so as to get at the inmates, but the miners were prepared for this move. Doors and windows were all carefully barricaded, and the only result of the bold movement was to increase the slaughter.

Chief after chief went down, either killed outright or badly disabled.

If the Indians had been white men they would have fought on, trusting to their overwhelming numbers to at last give them the victory, but they were not white men and could not be held together in one body as white men could and would have been.

By the time thirty or forty men were down the Apaches made up their minds that they had had about enough of this sort of thing, and so, picking up their dead and wounded, they decamped as fast as they could go, greatly to the joy of the miners, who could hardly believe that they had succeeded in so easily repulsing the Indians' attack.

But, now that the deed was accomplished, their spirits rose again, and it was with the greatest difficulty that their two leaders, Bronze Jack and Big Bill Williams, could restrain them from rushing forth to pursue the Apaches in their retreat.

"Steady, men, steady!" Jack had cried, as the men came rushing out into the street, blazing away at the flying foe, who were retreating as fast as their legs could carry them. "Don't get beyond the shelter of the town or you will regret it. We have beaten them off, but we are no match for them in the open country. There's altogether too many of them for us."

"That's thar leetle game now!" Williams exclaimed. "They want to git us to foller 'em up, and then they'll turn round and salivate us. Oh, I tell you, boys, I know these red bucks for all that they are worth!"

And the old scout was right; this was Manga Colorado's scheme exactly; but, thanks to the adventurer and the old scout, the cunningly-devised scheme did not succeed. The whites stuck close to the shelter of the shanties, and began to prepare for another attack, for they did not believe that Manga would rest satisfied with the beating he had received and tamely give up the plunder and scalps which seemed fairly within his grasp.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

JOHN AND JACK.

GAINING the hillside again, and getting fairly beyond range of the miners' fire, old Manga began to make a disposition of his forces which soon convinced the miners that the old red heathen by no means despaired of bagging the whole of them.

His first movement was to surround Big Walnut Camp with a line of warriors, thus cutting off the settlers' escape.

"He has failed in the attack, so he is going to try what a siege will do," the adventurer observed, upon beholding the movement.

"Wa-al, we've all right if we're got grub enough in the Camp to hold out until the heathens get tired or somebody comes to our assistance," was old Williams's opinion.

The miners, who overheard the remark, shook their heads. Big Walnut Camp was not over and above well supplied, as it happened, just at that time. True, a wagon-train from the lower towns with provisions was overdue, and might be expected to arrive at any time, but, as the Indians surely would capture the train the moment it appeared, that chance was cut off.

Jack asked Williams quietly from what quarter he expected assistance and the old scout answered from the lower posts on the Gila, where quite a force was stationed, but, as the adventurer reminded the scout, it would be necessary for a messenger to pass the Indian line and warn the posts of the danger to which Big Walnut Camp was exposed, before any assistance could be expected from them.

The messenger might succeed in slipping through the savage line; in fact, Big Bill Williams declared that he could do it and not half try, but, whether he could reach the Gila posts and return with the troops, before starvation would play the mischief with the besieged men was a question not easily answered.

And while the whites were puzzling their brains over their situation, the red-skins were no less bothered in regard to theirs.

They had the town surrounded by a ring of steel which it was madness to think that the pale-faces could break through, but, while they most certainly could keep the miners from getting out, they, on their own part, were equally certain of keeping them from getting in.

And it was no joke to feed five hundred warriors in such a country—or, to speak more correctly, to feed four hundred and fifty, for about fifty men had already been disabled in the fight. The miners had long since driven the game away from the vicinity of the town, and their dams and tunnels in the river had depopulated the stream of its fish. The quartermaster's department of a savage army doesn't amount to much: for two or three days such a force might manage to get on, but longer than that the commissary arrangement would be most decidedly at fault.

The problem then, in brief, was: could the town be taken within three or four days, and, if not, could he hold his followers together longer than that?

Manga and the principal chief debated over this difficult matter until the sun commenced to rise in the eastern skies, and the conclusion the savage warriors came to was to attack the village again, not with an impetuous rush as before, but by a slow approach, the moment nightfall set in, taking advantage of every cover they could find, and by attacking at all points they hoped to confuse the miners and weaken the force of the defense.

And then the Red Gold-Hunter, who had sat silent and moody during the discussion, saying never a word, begged to suggest a plan.

The plan of John Mustang was an extremely simple one and soon explained. He proposed to go to the miners under the protection of a flag of truce and ask for a talk. This, no doubt, would be granted. Then he would represent to them the terrible danger of their position—tell them that the Apaches had sworn with dreadful oaths never to leave the town while a single white man remained within it; but that, in consideration of

their brave defense, and with a view to spare the useless shedding of blood—for that the Apaches would certainly conquer in the end there was no doubt, when the extent of numbers compared with the miners was considered—if the pale-faces chose to give up the fight, (and of what use to wage war when death was the only prize to be gained?) the Apaches would permit them to depart and take what they could of their worldly goods with them.

The old red rascals nodded their heads at each other in approbation. Instinctively they guessed the scheme of the other, but Manga, who always wanted everything made clear, questioned the half-breed further:

"They leave the camp; what then?"

"It is many miles before they will reach a white village, and in the mountains, or on the prairie, what is to prevent the red-men from taking their scalps?"

A grunt of approval came from the lips of the grave warriors. This scheme suited them exactly. No disgrace to lie to a foe and trick him to his death, but a great fool the foe to be so tricked.

So, when the sun was well up, Mustang John mounted his horse, which he had procured, and with a piece of white cloth on a little stick he rode down the hillside.

Bronze Jack, a cocked rifle in his hand and with his revolvers loosened in their holsters, came forth to meet him.

The two came together at a point just about half-way between the town and the Indian line.

"Oh, it is you, is it?" Jack remarked, as he came up to the horseman.

"I want a talk!"

"Go ahead."

"The Apaches have you in a trap."

"Why don't they spring it, then?"

"There is nothing but death before you."

"What else is before any man?"

"But this death is certain; when the Indians again close in upon you, not a man will escape to tell the tale of how died the men of Big Walnut Camp!"

"Do you rely more on your words than on your weapons that you come with these brags?" Jack exclaimed, scornfully.

"The Apache chief, Manga Colorado, bears no ill-will to the men who dig; it is the blue-coats, the men who fight, whom he hates. He has killed them all up there," and the speaker waved his hand toward the smoldering ruins of the fort.

"All?" questioned the adventurer, a dark look upon his bronzed face, and as he spoke his eyes were fixed upon a handsome tress, evidently from a woman's head, that dangled from the speaker's girdle.

"All!" Mustang John replied, and a savage smile lighted up the handsome face. "I understand she is dead, too. This came from her head," and the speaker lifted up the long silken locks, once the pride of Cleopatra Dinwiddie, as he spoke.

"And you killed her?" Jack spoke with such constraint that it was plain he labored under deep emotion.

"Yes, I killed her—I killed her on your account, do you understand?"

"You are a demon in human shape!" the adventurer exclaimed, violently, "and it would be but Heaven's justice were I now to send you to your long home!" and in his angry excitement Jack brought the rifle up and leveled it full at the breast of the half-breed.

Mustang John never stirred, although the Apaches upon the hillside, who were watching the interview, were greatly agitated.

The half-breed fairly smiled in the face of Bronze Jack.

"Fire!" he said, softly; "this is the third time that I have sought death at your hands, and each and every time you have refused me the boon."

"No, no!" the adventurer cried, lowering the muzzle of the gun; "your blood must not be on my head."

"I killed the white squaw because she loved you; I killed the white captain, because he dared to dream of making Chito Colorado his squaw, as if the eagle would mate with the vulture!"

"Enough! You make me sick at heart! What want you?"

"The great Apache chief says, if the pale-faces throw down their arms they are free to depart."

"A trick, that he may murder us at his ease!"

"With your arms, then, depart in peace."

"Never! He would assail us on the road!"

"Listen, then: though death comes to all the rest, to you I bring life!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AN UNEXPECTED EVENT.

BRONZE JACK looked at the speaker in amazement. It was plain that he mistrusted him.

"You bring life to me?" he said, slowly.

"Yes; death to all the rest, but life to you."

"I do not understand how that can be."

"Your companions are doomed."

"Perhaps, and perhaps not," answered the adventurer.

"I tell you it is certain. Manga Colorado has sworn by the bones of all his fathers never to leave this spot until he has taken the white men's scalps and burnt their dwellings to the ground."

"I reckon we will be apt to have a few words to say about that, before the chief carries out his programme!" and Bronze Jack slapped the butt of his rifle, significantly. "We thrashed you red-skins out of the town pretty quickly when you tried it on, and what we have done, we can do again."

"Manga Colorado will cling to you—will surround you with a wall of steel and fire through which you cannot hope to break; one by one your best men will go down, and then when the time comes, in a last grand attack, he will exterminate the rest."

"You red-skins may believe that, but we white men do not," the adventurer answered, decidedly.

"We've got force enough to hold you at bay until assistance comes, and it will come in time."

"Will the birds of the air be your messengers to tell your far-off brothers that the Apaches hold you with a gripe of iron?" asked the half-breed, sarcastically.

"We will find messengers enough, and ways to send them when we care to do so," Jack answered, contemptuously.

"You will not believe me, then, when I tell you that death is so near?"

"No!"

"But it is, and I wish to save you."

"For such a bloodthirsty animal as you have shown yourself to be, you are wonderfully merciful!" the adventurer exclaimed, in stinging contempt.

"Merciful to you, and to you alone!" replied John Mustang, earnestly. "Do you see this horse? His better treads not the soil of earth; he is as fleet as the wind; the Indian line to the westward is badly guarded; I will dismount and approach you as if to shake hands and depart; you can improve the opportunity to strike me down; I will pretend to be stunned; you can spring upon the back of the horse; one bold dash and life and liberty is before you."

Bronze Jack surveyed the speaker in wonder.

"You have some trap concealed in this offer," he said, at last. He had a great distrust of the half-breed.

"Upon my soul I have not!" John Mustang cried in an earnest voice. "No matter what I am to all the rest of the world—no matter if my soul is steeped in blood, to you I am a true friend. There is no trap in my offer! It is liberty and life that I place before you."

Truth was in the voice of the speaker, if ever truth dwelt in the tones of a human.

Bronze Jack shook his head.

"You will not go?" John Mustang cried, his voice trembling.

"No."

"You will stay here and die—die by the hand of a red warrior who will tear your scalp from your head and hang it up to dry, as a trophy of triumph, in the smoke of his wigwam!"

"I am not so certain about that as you appear to be," Jack responded, dryly. "I do not agree with you that the victory of the Apaches is a foregone conclusion. I think that we can easily hold our own against you, and both old Manga and his warriors will soon tire of a game wherein they find that they can win nothing but death."

"But before the Apaches give up the fight they will make one last, desperate effort."

"Oh, yes, there's no doubt in my mind about that."

"And in that fight, and it will be a bloody one, you may perish."

"That may be—there is no telling; I do not bear a charmed life, and when my time comes I shall most certainly be obliged to step up to the captain's office and settle."

"But I now offer you a chance to escape the danger!" the half-breed urged, with singular persistence.

"And I laugh at the idea!" the adventurer cried, impulsively. "What do you take me for? If there were a drop of blood in my veins cowardly enough to yield to such a step, I'd take my knife and let it out. The men in yonder town look upon me as a leader. It was under my directions that we beat back your red devils in the last attack. Do you think that for the paltry sake of escaping from the peril now threatening them, I would turn my back and fly like a craven? No, sir! you don't know your man when you make such a proposal to me. My place is with yonder men in yonder town, until the thing is decided. With them I'll fight you and your red heathen, and we'll either flay you out and send you all howling back to the wilderness from whence you came, or else die in our tracks as befits good men and true."

"It is madness—it is madness!" John Mustang cried, an expression of pain upon his face. The half-breed seemed to be terribly in earnest in this matter, and if it was all a trick and he was only shamming after all, he was carrying out the artifice with most wonderful skill.

"Be it madness or not, that's my game, and I intend to play it for all it is worth!" Bronze Jack replied, in a tone of quiet resolution.

"It is your final answer?" the half-breed asked, gathering up the reins of his horse and preparing to depart.

"Yes, and you might talk from now until doomsday and you would get no other."

"Whether we ever meet again or not, you will believe that I have acted honestly in this matter—that I have tried to save you from the danger that threatens to the best of my ability?" The voice of the speaker was strangely low and sweet, almost feminine in its tones.

"Yes, I do believe you wish to save me," the adventurer answered, fixing his keen gaze upon the speaker with such a strange, earnest look that the half-breed's eyes sunk beneath the scrutiny.

"Three times have I given you life," continued Jack, "and now I really believe you wish to return the favor."

"It is so—it is the truth! I swear it by all that I hold sacred in this world!" Mustang John cried, earnestly. "But you may not fall in the fight; it may be your fate to fall a captive into the hands of the red-men; and if such should be the case, will you then take life from my hands?"

"Yes, most decidedly," Bronze Jack replied at once. "If the fortune of war gives me a prisoner into Manga's hands, and you offer me a chance to escape, you may rest assured that I will accept the offer."

"If the fight goes against you then—if you see that the Apaches are certain to win, and that nothing but captivity or death is left for you, do not wantonly throw away your life, but yield yourself prisoner to the red-men. They will not harm you if you surrender, for they will glory in such a prize as yourself to take back in triumph to their village. And once you are there—once you are in the Apache stronghold in the mountains, trust to me to save you, although you are guarded night and day by eyes that never sleep, and by a vigilance that never tires! Until then, God save you, Bronze Jack!"

The speaker wheeled his horse and was off like the wind, evidently overcome by emotion.

The adventurer looked after the half-breed for a moment, motionless and silent, and then he spoke:

"Oh, Nature, wonderful mistress! Who can analyze thy work!"

Jack returned slowly to the Camp, while John Mustang rode at full speed toward the spot where the old chief, Manga, and a score of the principal warriors of the tribe waited to learn the result of the interview.

The Apaches had watched the proceeding closely,

and being keen observers had come to the conclusion from what they saw that the attempt to lead the white-skins into a trap had failed, and therefore they were fully prepared for Mustang John's return.

"He is not only a great warrior, but a cunning one," old Manga Colorado observed, gravely, after the half-breed had finished. "We must expect to lose much blood and many warriors before we can hope to conquer those white men."

Hostilities at once began. The Indians crept up as near to the town as they could, blazing away whenever they caught a glimpse of a miner and the whites returned the compliment.

The day passed slowly without much damage to either side. Night came on, and, as the darkness thickened, Manga gathered his men for another desperate attack.

But, as the red-skins began to creep in upon their prey an event occurred that threw their line into complete confusion.

With yell, demonlike in their nature, a party of mounted white men came charging through the Apache line!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE TRUTH AT LAST.

TWENTY or thirty well-mounted, well-armed horsemen, and the way they came down upon the Indians was a caution! Taking the Apaches entirely by surprise they cut a wide gap in the line of steel and fire that the old chief had drawn around the town. It was plain that the new-comers, alarmed by the sound of the firing, had taken pains to discover the exact state of affairs before making their presence known, and the Apaches, never dreaming of a fire in their rear, had not taken any precautions against a surprise; and so they had fallen easy victims to the terrible charge.

Like a whirlwind, bearing death in its career, the horsemen had swooped down upon the red-skins; at point-blank range they had emptied their revolvers at the savage foe, for they had managed their advance so cautiously that the Indians had no idea of their presence until the death-dealing charge was made, and the horsemen were on them, raining bullets thick as hail-stones.

Seized with a panic the Apaches fled in terror from the track of the horsemen and gathered on the hill by the ruins of the fort.

Not knowing what had happened, but understanding that a serious fight was going on, Manga had called in his warriors and hastened toward the scene of conflict, but, upon meeting the panic-stricken warriors, and learning from them that, instead of the white men of the besieged town endeavoring to break out, it was a large party of strange horsemen attempting to force their way in, the old chief became cautious.

The flying chiefs, too, wonderfully overestimated the number of the new-comers. Fifty at least they declared, and some said nearer a hundred, and Manga came to the conclusion that it must be quite a large force, for in the charge they had slain a dozen warriors.

In hot haste, then, and sorely troubled in regard to the future, Manga withdrew to the hillside and disposed his forces either to fight or fly as events might warrant.

Reënforced by the new-comers, neither Bronze Jack nor Big Bill Williams hesitated to give battle, even against what was apparently overwhelming odds. But the adventurer believed in a bold game, and the old Indian scout had fought red-skins long enough, and knew enough of their tactics, to know that no matter how great their numbers they rarely would stand to face the brunt of a well-directed attack.

There were enough horses in the town to mount some forty of the miners, and with the new-comers, Jack could boast of a force that exceeded sixty men, well-armed and desperate fighters all.

No time was wasted; the whites understood that the successful charge must have materially demoralized the red-skins, and so the moment the moon got up high enough to afford light for the attempt, Jack gave the word to move.

At a brisk trot the force rode out of the town, and as they ascended the hillside, which was only a gentle slope and did not impede the movements of the horses, they deployed in a double line in skirmish fashion.

Deceived by the double line, and believing that there were more behind the first two files, the Apaches were greatly at fault in regard to the number of the foe. They fell at once into the belief that the attacking force was nearly as great as their own, and therefore, after Indian idea, having no stomach for risking a fight upon anything like equal terms, they contented themselves with firing a scattering volley as the horsemen came dashing up the ascent, and then, as the whites opened fire in return, they took to their heels and fled, each man for himself—Indian fashion again—as fast as they could.

The Apaches scampered away in a most lusty manner, and as the ground in the rear of the fort, descending a little to where it met the timber line, was broken and uneven, and therefore impeded the horsemen, the Indians succeeded in reaching the timber without suffering much loss.

The only mounted man in the throng was the half-breed, John Mustang; and the fleet steed upon which he relied for safety proved his ruin, although, truly, it might be ascribed to the work of his own hand rather than to the fault of the horse.

Some thieving Indian, anxious for plunder, had taken the body of the dead girl, Cleopatra, and concealed it back of some bushes in the rear of the fort, so that he might strip it of its valuables at his leisure, and the steed of the half-breed, guided by the rider directly for the body, not knowing it was there, with instinctive horror that all horses have of dead bodies, with a snort of fear, plunged violently to one side at the sight of the dead woman, and, despite Mustang John's skill as a rider, unseated him.

But, as the half-breed pitched forward over the horse's shoulder, he held fast to the lines, and the frightened animal kicked him, so that for a moment he was disabled.

Moments count more than hours sometimes, and so it was in this case, for before the half-breed could recover the use of his leg stiffened by the animal's kick, one of the miners was down upon him, and with a well-aimed revolver-ball stretched him bleeding upon the ground.

Bronze Jack was right behind the man and had

cried out to him to refrain from firing, and to the half-breed to surrender.

"Too late, Cap; I had to plug the leetle cuss!" and then the fellow rode on, having once drawn blood, eager for more.

Jack dismounted and knelt by the side of the stricken one.

"Air—give me air—I stifle! I die!" murmured the half-breed, in a hollow voice.

With a single movement of his muscular hand Jack tore the hunting-shirt open at the breast, and then, all at once, the secret of the Red Gold-Hunter was revealed:

Bronze John was a woman!

As the reader has probably guessed, the half-breed leader of the Red Gold-Hunters and the beautiful, though masculine-appearing Indian girl, Chito, daughter of Manga Colorado, were one and the same.

The tigress was dying.

She unclosed her eyes and gazed for the last time upon the face of the man whom she had fancied after her own savage fashion.

She had fought against the passion with all the strength of her savage nature; she had endeavored to make herself believe that she hated the strange white man, and with all her power she had sought his life, but now, in her last agony, she acknowledged the truth.

"Chito dies," she murmured, faintly; "no squaw; die—die like warrior."

And this was the last word that the girl uttered; she closed her eyes, drew a long breath, and all was over.

The return of the victorious horsemen awoke Bronze Jack to earthly things once more.

Complete had been the victory of the whites; the Indians, though thoroughly thrashed, had not suffered severely, thanks to the promptitude of their retreat.

Decent burial was given to the remains of those who had fallen in the fight, and a courier immediately dispatched to carry to the outer world the knowledge of the events that had taken place in the vicinity of Big Walnut Camp.

But the new-comers—who were they who had dashed so fortunately to the rescue?

Twenty carefully selected men, the best that the town of Tejon Camp could boast, led by the adventuring woman, Barbara of Buenaventura, whom the readers of the tale known as the "Fresh of Frisco" will surely remember.

It was the heiress of old Michael Scott, the cattle-king, who had dispatched Bronze Jack, or, to give him his own name, Jackson Blake, in search of the secret mine in the old Yuma valley.

But, after he had gone, her mind misgave her; bad dreams troubled her slumber at night; and in her visions she saw him here surrounded by a thousand perils, and calling upon her to come to his aid.

There was enough of the old Scotch blood in her veins to make her believe that in some slight degree she possessed the gift of second-sight, and she could not help yielding credence to her dreams, so she organized the expedition and had arrived at a most opportune moment.

"But I have failed," Jack explained. "I cannot win the mine without an army at my back!"

"What care I for the mine?" she replied, impetuously. "I have gold enough, and I lack your counsel and aid in Tejon Camp. Come with me, my lord and master!"

Was it in human nature to refuse? and besides, our hero truly loved the lady.

And so the great Apache expedition ended, and to this day no man has found the hidden mine. No doubt that it exists, although the spirits that were said to haunt the old Yuma city have passed away.

Our tale is told; our hero we leave the master of Tejon Camp, but of some strange adventures that befall him in the Mohave valley we may write anon.

THE END.

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